

*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, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Eph. 4:31-32*

On November 19, 2006 the United States Marine's India Company entered the terror-infested city of Fallujah, Iraq as the "tip of the spear" – the first to charge - into battle. After seven days and nights of urban combat, of the 158 Marines in India Company, three were tragically killed and 25 wounded. One of those seriously wounded was Lance Corporal Klayton South who was shot in the mouth by an armed insurgent who greeted him with AK-47 as he opened a door. As a result, Corporal South underwent multiple surgeries to repair the damage done to his head, face and neck. When asked if, in hindsight, he would have done anything different, he replied: “Nope, not a thing. I’d be right in the same place, doing the same thing, fighting for freedom with my buddies.” His words are not unlike the words of another soldier who, in World War II, responded to a chaplain who told him: "You have lost an arm in the great cause," by saying, "No. I didn't *lose* my arm to a great cause— I *gave* it to a great cause."

Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the brutal Nazi concentration camps of WWII, once said: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way.” In Philippians 2:5-8 the apostle Paul wrote: *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."* Jesus did not *lose* his life, but rather he purposefully chose to *give it away*. And when you and I *chose* to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior, we also *chose* to purposefully give our lives away. Jesus said: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"* (Mark 8:34); *"Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me"* (Luke 18:22).

God's Word tells us that in choosing to follow Jesus, we are choosing to put on the character of Jesus. The apostle Paul, in the chapter that opens our text for this morning, exhorts us to that same calling: *"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:1-3). The *"therefore"* Paul is referencing, refers to the answer to his prayer in Ephesians 3 for those of us in the church: *"I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God"* (Ephesians 3:14-19).

What Paul is telling us in all these words we've read here – is that choosing to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior should make a definite and dramatic difference in your life. True conversion gives evidence in changed actions. By virtue of the fact that we have surrendered your life to Jesus, we have chosen to put on the character of Jesus, and therefore there are certain things that are no longer part of our lives. This is what it means to be a Christian. There are some things that Christians do not do. And we read about *what* those things are throughout Ephesians 4, things like lying and stealing and anger and bitterness and gossip. Yet choosing to follow Jesus is not just about what we won't do. This is where so many Christians stop short. The Christian life is much more than just not smoking, not drinking, not dancing, not gambling and not watching X-rated movies. This is the negative brand of faith that the world too often sees in those who claim Christ, the judgmental impression that is associated with those who seek to: *"put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires"* – but who have yet *"to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness"* (Ephesians 4:22-24).

We see this negative/positive “*put off . . . put on*” concept in the very next verse which exhorts us to – “*therefore . . . put away falsehood*” and “*let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another*” (Ephesians 4:25). This is what it means to “*put on*” the character of Christ. We not merely to restrain our selfish tongues regarding our judgmental thoughts about those who are around us; we also are to speak love, mercy, grace and truth into those same lives. God’s Word tells us that if Jesus is truly within us, we will not only stop offending others but we will take the next step to seek restoration with them. Christ-likeness means putting off the negative and then embracing, putting on, that which is positive. And Paul clearly is telling us the same in our text for this morning: “*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, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*” (Ephesians 4:31-32).

This morning we continue in our Seeking Him series, which is focused on how we can know a deeper intimacy in our relationship with God, and today we will be looking at another means in God’s Word, by which by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can seek God and grow in our walk with God. In the past weeks we’ve already seen the need, and have taken the steps of humility, honesty, repentance, grace, holiness, obedience and a clear conscience - and today we are looking at both the need and the means by which we can seek God through *forgiveness*. You would think this wouldn’t be a problem once we’ve embraced and pursued the steps of humility, honesty, repentance, grace, holiness, obedience and a clear conscience. But in knowing that God created us for relationships, first with Himself and then for a relationship with one another – and in knowing that we cannot love God in isolation from all other relationships in life – we are faced with the reality that everyone, both those who claim Christ and those who don’t, will always struggle to varying degrees with conflict in our human relationships.

Getting along with people can be difficult because we all still sin and we all live in a fallen, sinful world. We irritate one another, rub each other the wrong way, clash and crash with those who have opposing personalities. At times it seems we live in a land of emotional terrorists, who are constantly sabotaging our plans by their thoughtless actions. And most often our response to such things is far from being like Christ. And try as we might through counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists – the only place where we can solve our human relationship problem is not through people, but through our relationship to God - because our relationship with God is reflected in our relationship with one another.

We see this reciprocal relationship pattern most clearly in the area of “*forgiveness.*” As beneficiaries of God’s mercy and grace and love through His forgiveness, we are called to put off “*all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander*” and put on the character of Christ, so that we might “*be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.*” And the foundational reason and purpose we are to do so, is because “*God in Christ forgave*” us. The story is told of a WWII prison camp where 20 men came in from digging and lined their shovels up on the wall. When the shovels were counted, the prison camp officer found only 19. He demanded that the one who didn’t bring in his shovel to step forward. None did. And so he threatened that if no one stepped forward he would choose ten men at random and shoot them. A young man of about 19 years old stepped forward and was immediately taken a few steps a way and shot in the head as an example to the others. The prisoners were dismissed, and the shovels were counted again and it was found that there was twenty after all. The prison camp officer had miscounted.

In John 15:13 Jesus said: “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.*” This difference between what that young man did in that prison camp, and what Jesus did for you and I on the cross, is that while *the young man did not know who was guilty*, he was still willing lay down his life so that ten men would not lose theirs – but *Jesus knew and knows that you and I and every person ever born on earth is absolutely, totally, without-a-doubt guilty*, yet he was still willing to sacrifice his life on painful, bloody cross so that all those who receive him as their Lord and Savior will receive eternal life forever and ever. The picture of a dying Christ on the cross pleading to God that He would forgive those who nailed him there, reveals the true depth of God’s love and mercy and grace. When we do love one another, as Christ sacrificially loved us, we will forgive one another as God forgave us “*in Christ.*”

Jesus said: "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); "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). It would be easy to use these verses as a motivation to forgive others, but in doing so we would again be falling into the negative Christian mindset of seeing our forgiveness of others as a *means* of escaping God's unforgiving condemnation and punishment. And while we must *put off* our negative unforgiving attitude, we must not forsake our call to *put on* the positive forgiving others as "*God in Christ forgave you.*" God's forgiveness should positively *motivate* us to forgive others. Christ's death on the cross forgave us our sins, which should naturally cause us forgive each other.

God's forgiveness in Christ should *motivate* us to forgive others *without exception*. God does not forgive *selectively in what sins He forgives*. In Christ *all our sins* are forgiven – past, present, and future. No sin is left uncovered by the cross and so we dare not be selective so far as which sins we will forgive and which we will not. God does not forgive *selectively in who He forgives*. On the cross Jesus prayed for those who put him there: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34) and so we dare not be selective in who we will forgive. God does not forgive *selectively in how many times He forgives*. Once Peter asked Jesus: "*Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*" and Jesus said: "*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven*" (Matthew 18:21-22) and so we dare not be selective in how many times we will forgive. God's forgiveness in Christ should *motivate* us to forgive others *without exception sacrificially*. At the expense of his own life, Jesus accomplished forgiveness for our sins. When we forgive the sins of another against us, we cease to require that they "pay for it" and we declare the fact that we are willing to bear that price ourselves. When we forgive, we are then set free in our own hearts to fully experience God's forgiveness.

Why is it that we don't forgive? The reasons are varied. Some argue that *we shouldn't forgive someone who hasn't asked for it*. If that's true, then we shouldn't have been forgiven by God. Ephesians 2:4-5: "*God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved*"; Romans 5:8: "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners (continue to sin), Christ died for us.*" None of us ever asked God for forgiveness before the cross: He forgave us when we were spiritually dead and still sinning. In Christ we are to forgive regardless of whether or not those who have hurt us ask for forgiveness.

*We also don't forgive because of our pride and ego*. This happens when we see ourselves on a higher moral ground than the ones who hurt us, convincing ourselves that they don't deserve forgiveness. The problem is this makes us the persecutor, judge and jury of that person's heart motivations (which is not our job); which then infects our own hearts with the need to be *right* rather than *reconciled*; which flies in the face of Jesus' admonition to "*love one another as I have loved you*" (John 13:34) and to "*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven*" (Matt. 5:44-45). He said: "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*" (Matt. 5:9).

*We also don't forgive because we want revenge*. This happens when we won't let go of the hurt we feel that's been done to us. Yet in the face of refusing to forgive, we read that love "*does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful*" (1 Corinthians 13:5). The NASB translates "*resentful*" as "*does not take into account a wrong suffered.*" The truth is that when we refuse to forgive because we have been hurt, the only ones we are hurting is ourselves. Studies show that people who hold grudges because of hurt risk serious physical and emotional consequences. The spiritual consequences are beyond measure. I am not sure if you've noticed it, but life is filled with pain, hurt and suffering. Forgiving someone who has hurt us is about becoming free from the wounds of the past so we can enjoy the present. Archibald Hart says "forgiveness is surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me."

When we refuse to forgive, we erect a barrier in our relationship between ourselves and that person, which is really a barrier between ourselves and God, which are barriers we can never move beyond on our own. Oh, we might think we've moved beyond it, but deep down in our hearts un-forgiveness is still there, rooted deep in the ground of *self*. Once we refuse to forgive we build a wall that keeps intimacy from deepening and stops trust from progressing. As long as we choose to hold the past over someone's head, we are choosing to forfeit any opportunity for a deeper relationship with them and with God. Remember Jesus said: *"If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."*

Refusal to forgive cuts us off from God's *cleansing* forgiveness. Note that Paul tells us we are to be *"forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."* Jesus is our example, our model of forgiveness here. If we don't forgive each other, we show that we haven't truly embraced the forgiveness our Lord has extended to us. God will not forgive us if we do not forgive each other. Jesus is also our example in this in that Jesus' purpose in life was to glorify God by sacrificing his life, taking our place on the cross, so that we might know the forgiveness of our sins. And so the most Christ-like thing we could do is to forgive those who hurt us or sin against us – which means the most un-Christ-like thing we could do would be to not forgive someone who hurt us or has sinned against us. Jesus did not wait for us to ask for forgiveness before he went to the cross; Romans 5:8: *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Jesus did not claim his right as God to stand above us and judge us as being undeserving of forgiveness; Philippians 2:5-8: *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."* Jesus did not withhold forgiveness from us because of all of the pain and hurt and suffering and torture he experienced on the cross for our sins on our behalf; Colossians 1:19-22: *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him."* The most Christ-like thing we can do in life is to forgive as Jesus forgave: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"* (Matthew 16:24-25).

On October 2, 2006 Charles Carl Roberts walked into the West Nickel Mines Amish School House in Georgetown, Pennsylvania and took 10 young girls hostage. He tied them up, shot them, and then killed himself. Five of the girls died. A minister at the funeral of the children described seeing an Amish mother embalming her 13-year-old daughter, who was shot in the forehead at the school. She carefully and lovingly dressing her daughter, preparing her for burial. All around the family watched, even the little children, all crying softly and listening as their grandfather told them not to hate the man with the gun who did this. "We must not think evil of this man," he said. "Forgive, as God forgives us." Not long after, at the funeral for Charles Roberts a few miles from the one-room schoolhouse, dozens of Amish neighbors came out to mourn the death of the one who had killed five of their young girls and wounded five more. Charles Roberts' wife Marie, and their three small children looked on her husband was buried beside the grave of their infant daughter whose death nine years ago apparently haunted Charles, which he claimed caused him in his anger toward God to shoot and murder the young Amish girls. Marie Roberts was overcome with not only grief, but also deeply touched and moved by the love and forgiveness towards her and her family that was shown by the Amish community on that day. On that day they also presented her with a substantial gift of money to help her through the loss of her husband. The forgiveness shown by the Amish in these tragic murders stunned the watching world. For most, that kind of faith was beyond comprehension, even for many who claim Christ. What sets apart those who have a deep faith in Jesus from those who do not is how we deal with those who hurt us. Charles Roberts committed a horrible crime against humanity out of his anger at God for the death of his daughter. The Amish in Georgetown responded to their tragedy in a much different way. They did not return evil for evil. Beyond all human understanding, they forgave the one who painfully hurt them.

It seems in our time that religion makes the front pages usually in the ghastliest ways. In the name of God, the faithful fly planes into buildings, blow themselves up to murder the innocent, burn down rival houses of worship, insult and condemn and cry out to heaven for vengeance. But sometimes religion reveals something else. At times, what we do see is that faith in Jesus Christ will empower ordinary men and women do what is humanly impossible: *to love, to forgive, to heal and to redeem*. To voluntarily forgive those who have deeply hurt us is an act of beauty and great grace. That's what Jesus did on the cross for you and for I. When we forgive those who hurt us, Jesus is reflected and revealed in us.

Sadly such a faith is unusual in this world, even within Christian circles. The forgiveness shown towards Charles Roberts by the Amish made no sense by the standards of society. But by the standards of the cross, it's the only thing to do in the kingdom of God. The Amish used this deeply painful occasion of spectacular evil as an *opportunity* to be a bright witness to hope. Despite their loss, they became a light shining in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The truth is, the minute we say "no" to forgiveness, we are ripping Jesus right out of our hearts and lives, and from that resulting emptiness of soul and spirit we have nothing of value to give one another. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven.

When we forgive we are acting according to God's character. Because of His love for us, He forgave us. Ephesians 2:4-5: *“God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved.”* When our love for God and our love for one another is a Spirit empowered love, that love will force itself outward from the center of our souls and rain the grace of forgiveness into the hearts and lives of each other and all others. God's love draws us together into the life and fellowship of the body of Jesus – and as we love one another, we are drawn together into the life of God. When we forgive we act with grace, the grace that we have already received from God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 3:8-9 says, *“Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”* Jesus did not *lose* his life at Calvary; he *gave* it so that we might know the freedom of forgiveness. The greatest blessing we can ever receive is the blessing of both freeing ourselves and those who have hurt us from the burden of sin. Jesus himself told us we are to forgive as we've been forgiven. When we chose Christ we also chose to sacrificially love and forgive and he did for us. May God helps us to do so.

*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*

*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:1-17*