

4. Forgiving and Loving

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[0 : 0 0] Our gracious God and our loving Heavenly Father, we do thank you for bringing us together on this rainy day. We thank you Lord for the rain which keeps our reservoirs full and our crops growing.

Bless you for it. We thank you Lord that you have drawn us together as different members of the one body under Christ. That you have brought us from different backgrounds, different nationalities, different walks of life and have made us one in him.

We thank you Lord for your rich mercy, for the great love with which you loved us. That though we were dead in trespasses, you made us alive together with Christ. We thank you that it is by your grace that we have been saved through faith.

That it is not our doing, but rather your gift. And so as we meet as Christ's people, we ask that you will give us a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of yourself.

That the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened. That we may know the hope to which we have been called. And the riches of the glorious inheritance we have in him. So we pray by the inspiration of your spirit we will walk in a manner worthy of our calling.

[1 : 1 5] With all humility, gentleness, patience. Bearing with one another in love. Eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Pray that our fellowship and our worship will be acceptable to you. And our thoughts turn to those members of this body, Lord, who cannot be with us. Through sickness. Through difficult home circumstance.

Through life situations. We ask, Lord, that you will help us to minister to them. To build them up in love. To encourage them in their Christian walk. So we pray, Lord, that our time together might be for the praise of your glory.

In the name of Christ we ask. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, this is our fourth and final study in this short series we titled The Imitation of Christ.

And in the past three weeks we have looked at those instances in the New Testament where a writer of a letter points our attention to Christ as the pattern for Christian conduct.

[2 : 1 9] In our first study in Philippians we saw that we were commanded to be humble. And Paul pointed us to the example of Christ who though he was in the form of God, became nothing and took the form of a servant.

In our second study we looked at, I can't remember, 2 Corinthians 8, sorry. Again, another letter of Paul. 2 Corinthians 8. And Paul speaking about Christian giving.

He pointed us once more to the example of Christ who though he was rich for our sake became poor and encouraged us in the grace of giving. And last week we looked at Peter's letter to suffering Christians in Asia Minor and how he reminded them that Christ was their example.

One who was blameless and yet who was suffering and at the same time committing himself to God. He was our example of a blameless sufferer.

And in our fourth and final study we'll look at this brief passage in Ephesians chapter 4 and 5 where Paul exhorts us to follow the example of Christ and to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

[3 : 32] So we're reading on page 978. We're beginning at verse 25 of chapter 4, reading down to chapter 5 verse 2. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And 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, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[5 : 04] And we thank that same God for the light of his word. Well, we've just seen, haven't we, the 60th anniversary of the European Union.

I'm sure we all have an opinion on the European Union. But one thing that has to be said is, the people that set it up were pretty ambitious. And one of them was a man, perhaps a Christian man, called Michael Schumann.

And he said this, as he signed the sort of initial papers. We are carrying out a great experiment, the fulfillment of the same recurrent dream that for 10 centuries has revisited the peoples of Europe, creating between them an organization, wait for it, putting an end to war, and guaranteeing an eternal peace.

It's pretty ambitious. It's a vision statement, isn't it? An end to war, an eternal peace. Well, it's ambitious, but it's not as ambitious as God's purpose for the world. And in chapter 1 of Ephesians, Paul tells us the mystery of God's will.

In verse 9, he says, God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven, and things on earth.

[6 : 24] Not merely some little financial collaboration between the countries of Western Europe. God's purpose is to unite all things in Christ. And that's what we see in Revelation, isn't it?

We have that vision of the great multitude, people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, gathered around the throne, worshipping God and worshipping the Lamb, united in Christ.

That is the plan of God. But how is it to be accomplished? Well, in chapter 2 of Ephesians, Paul tells us that the price of that unity was paid by Christ.

Verse 13, But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He himself is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

Christ's death meant the believers would have peace with God, but more than that, they would have peace with one another. They were reconciled to one another. The two men being made one, and both being reconciled to God through Christ's death on the cross.

[7 : 35] And for the Ephesian believers, that meant the Jews and the Gentiles were now mixing freely. You remember when Paul went to Ephesus, he found Jews in the synagogue, and some of them listened to his message, some of them were pretty hostile and drove them out.

And he found all sorts of pagans as well. And you remember that as he preached, these sorcerers, these magicians were converted, and they brought their scrolls to be burned as they turned their backs on the black arts they'd practiced.

And they became Christians. And these two groups were there for meeting together. You had these very strict religious Jews who'd come to know the Messiah, and you had these pagan magicians, formerly having nothing to do with each other.

And now they were going around to each other's houses, and having lunch together every Sunday. Must have been a very interesting dynamic there. Unity was God's plan for the universe.

The price was paid by Christ the Son, and that unity was preserved by the Spirit. Chapter 4, verse 3, the Christians are to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

[8 : 40] There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. God the Father planned it, Christ the Son purchased it, and the Holy Spirit preserved that unity.

But of course, as you know, when you get a lot of people from different backgrounds, with different ways of thinking about things, and you put them together, you often get a little bit of friction. That's the basis, isn't it, of Big Brother?

Not a program I should say I watch, but it's that idea, you get a lot of people who are very different, you put them in a house and you watch the fireworks. And that seems to be a problem in Ephesus, and it seems to have been a problem in every church since, that different people coming together with different backgrounds, sometimes we tread on each other's toes.

Sometimes we say things which are unkind, accidentally perhaps, sometimes deliberately. Sometimes we do things which are unfeeling or unthinking, which cause somebody else pain.

And as such, that unity, so precious to God, so priceless, can be threatened. Hard words, hard feelings, hard thoughts. And so Paul writes to this church in Ephesus, in order to tell them the secret of Christian unity.

[9 : 54] And we're just going to look at chapter 4, verse 32, to 5, verse 2. He says two things. Firstly, you are to forgive one another, as God and Christ forgave you.

And secondly, you are to walk in love, as Christ loved you. They are to forgive one another, as God forgave them. And they are to love one another, as Christ loved them.

Chapter 4, verse 32, Be forgiving. And Paul has already, in the letter, told them exactly what it was God has forgiven them. Chapter 1, verse 7. He says, In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins.

And throughout the letter, Paul reminds them just how great sinners they were. They were dead in their sin, utterly unable to please God.

They were sons of disobedience, willfully doing what they knew was wrong, according to conscience. They pleased themselves, they worshipped themselves, carrying out the desires of the flesh.

[10 : 58] And their hostility to God meant they were, quite frankly, children of wrath. Sinners in the hands of an angry God. But, chapter 2, verse 4 tells us, 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, and raised up with him, and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. We were dead, we have been raised to life, we were sinners, he has forgiven us all of our sins.

We were children of wrath, and now we are seated in the heavenlies with the Son of God. And this, says Paul, is God's sheer grace, his mercy, and his love.

And so he says, if you grasp that, if you grasp exactly what God has forgiven you, you should therefore be able to forgive others when they sin against you, when they speak against you, when they do things against you, when you realise the sheer magnitude of God's forgiveness, you should be able to extend to them a little forgiveness yourself.

It's the same principle Jesus spoke of in the parable of the merciful servant. You have that man who was a hundred thousand talents in debt. I don't know quite how much that is.

[12 : 23] It sounds like an awful lot. I think it was just a huge sum, a sum that no one could ever pay. And he's in great trouble. He's about to be thrown in prison. His wife and his daughter and his son are about to be sold as slaves to pay part of the debt.

And he goes to his manager and says, please be merciful to me. Cancel my debt. And the manager does. And the man is free. What a wonderful feeling. And as he's walking home and he's wondering what to cook for dinner to celebrate that night, he meets one of his colleagues and this man owes him a hundred denarii, a couple of months rent.

And he says, that money you owe me, I think it's time you paid it back. And the man says, well, I don't have that money. And rather than forgiving him his debt, what does he do? He throws him in prison. The unmerciful servant.

And Paul says, you must realize the debt which God has forgiven you. You who were dead in sin, who were children of wrath. And when you realize that, verse 32, you will be able to forgive one another.

Well, they're challenging words, aren't they? As we peer over the fence into the church in Ephesus and realize there were people who needed to forgive one another. And perhaps you're sitting here today in this congregation and as these words are being read, you're thinking of people whom you are perhaps needing to forgive, perhaps harboring a grudge against, perhaps there's some undealt with anger, and perhaps we need to heed together these words of verse 32.

[13 : 58] We need to forgive one another for Christ has forgiven us. Or perhaps you're sitting here and you're not in need of forgiving someone, but you yourself need to be forgiven.

That there is somebody you know you've wronged, you know you've spoken against, you know you're just not right with. And perhaps you need to seek out that person and to seek their forgiveness.

That this unity of the Spirit, which is so precious to God, might be preserved. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

They are to forgive one another, but more than that, they are to love one another. Chapter 5, verses 1 and 2. Now, a few weeks ago, I was up in Oban for a wedding, and we had a day off, Helen and I, so we decided to get on a boat and go to Mull.

And we went to Tobermory, that lovely little colourful village, and we had some chocolate, and we had lunch, and a bit of a loose end, so we went into the Mull Museum, which I can heartily recommend.

[15 : 05] It's a lovely little museum. It's free, and full of interesting facts. And one of the things that struck me in the museum was the kind of wartime exhibits. There was two stories of soldiers.

One of them had gone off to war. He had, they thought, been killed, and so they chiseled his name on the war memorial. And a few months later, he reappeared. And obviously, everyone was very happy, except perhaps the sculptor.

But there was another chap who didn't have that fate. And he died. And next to the photo of that man, there was a photo of this man and this little scroll, which had been given to his family after the announcement of his death.

And it said this, He whom the scroll commemorates was numbered among those who, at the call of king and country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardness, faced danger, and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom.

This man gave up his life in order that others might benefit. Chapter 5, verse 2, Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[16 : 31] Paul reminds them that Christ gave himself up for them to purchase that forgiveness, to grant them that peace with God, to reconcile them to the Father. He gave himself up.

And it's a very interesting word. The word which is used is usually translated elsewhere, delivered, or even betrayed. And so, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew, we find that as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, he predicts that he will be betrayed, given up into the hands of the Gentiles.

And as he comes into Jerusalem, Judas goes out to betray him, to give him up. The Jewish soldiers, they beat him, and they deliver him, they give him up to Pilate.

And Pilate, having questioned them, questioned Christ, hands him over to be crucified. He delivers him, he gives him up. And we might think, as we read the Gospels, that Christ was a victim, just a helpless pawn in a vicious game.

But Paul says, no, verse 2, he gave himself up. The same word is used. He delivered himself. He did so voluntarily, willingly, in obedience to God the Father.

[17 : 46] Why, verse 2? Because of love. He loved us. Christ loved his people so much that he was willing to go to the cross. He loved his Father so much he was willing to obey him in offering himself as an atoning sacrifice.

That great love of God which we've met in chapter 1, which predestined us for adoption as sons. That love of God which in chapter 2, which was rich in mercy and raised us with Christ.

It is that love which sent Christ to the cross to give himself up for the sins of others. And so, says Paul, that is the attitude of Christ.

His attitude of self-sacrifice, of pursuing that which is best for others, of loving them and giving himself for them. And so, you Ephesian believers and you Glaswegian believers, that is how you need to walk, with that attitude of love, of seeking others' interests before your own.

And that's what that little list in chapter 4 seems to spell out. Verse 25, Put away falsehood, no more to lie to each other, instead they are to speak the truth to each other, for they are members of one body.

[19 : 01] They are not to be angry with each other anymore, not to sin and give a foothold to the devil in their fellowship. Verse 28, The thief is no longer to steal, he's no longer to take, but he is to labour, that he might have something to share, to give to someone in need.

Verse 29, Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up. Instead of tearing each other down and bringing each other down with their words and their backbiting and their gossip, they were to build one another up.

And their conversation was to give grace. And above all, in verse 30, they were not to grieve the Holy Spirit, the Spirit in whom they have that unity in Christ, not to grieve him, but instead were to put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander.

Forgive one another, says Paul, to maintain the unity of the Spirit and love one another in order to build up the body of which you are a part. Walk in love, as Christ loved us.

Well, it's a perennial message, isn't it? As we look back through the history of the church and we see congregations divided, families divided, people taking sides, factions, harsh words said, unfeeling actions taken.

[20 : 28] We need to hear these words of Paul to be forgiving and to be loving. And as we come to the end of this series, I pray it's been a blessing to look at these four passages together as we seek to be imitators of Christ.

A couple of years ago at Keswick, I didn't go that year, I went the year after and it rained all week, but the year before was, I think, John Stott's final appearance. And he said, the sum of the matter is this, this is where my mind has come to rest, after all his long and faithful years of Christian service, is that God wants his people to be like Christ.

Christ-likeness is the will of God for his people. The Christ who made himself nothing, but took the form of a servant. The Christ who, though he was rich, became poor for their sakes.

And the Christ who was willing to suffer on their behalf and to give in himself to the one who judges justly. The Christ who forgave them. The Christ who loved them and who gave himself up for them.

That says Paul and that says our brother John Stott, is the will of God for his people. Christ-likeness. Let's pray together. Father, we do thank you, Lord, that you are so rich in mercy, so rich in love, so rich in grace, that you are willing to accept us, not for anything we have done, but on the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, to cleanse us from all sin and to bring us into your family.

[22 : 01] Lord, we thank you for these four passages of scripture, for the lessons contained within them. And we pray that as we meditate upon them, that you will enable us and equip us to apply them.

That in our own church or our own churches, wherever we serve, we will be those who want to serve, those who want to give, those who want to suffer for Christ, and those who want to love and build up our brothers and sisters in him.

We do pray, Lord, that you might help us to forgive those who wrong us and to seek forgiveness when we have wronged others. And above all, Lord, you will help us to walk in love, to bring forth that wonderful fruit of love in our lives, that we might love one another, and by this, all men might know that we are Christ's.

So we thank you for our time together. In his name. Amen. Thank you.