

²⁹Do not let any unwholesome talk come from your mouths. Say only what is beneficial when there is a need to build up others, so that it will be a blessing to those who hear. ³⁰Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Get rid of every kind of bitterness, rage, anger, quarreling, and slander, along with every kind of malice. ³²Instead, be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one other, just as God in Christ has forgiven us.

^{5:1}Therefore, be imitators of God as his dearly loved children. ²And walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (EHV)

Theme: Forgive as God has Forgiven Us

A married couple sits down with their pastor for some counseling. There have been some problems in their marriage and it comes out that adultery has been committed. Tears were shed, feelings were hurt; and then one turns to the other and says, “I can never forgive you for what you did to me.”

A man is convicted of murdering a young girl—a horrible and violent crime. As his sentence comes down from the judge, the young girl’s mother stands up and shouts, “You murderer! I will never ever forgive you for what you’ve done to my family.”

Sadly, we see it all the time—whether in our own lives, the news, or in a movie, people refusing to forgive someone else. Forgiveness doesn’t come naturally for us. Our sinful nature doesn’t understand the concept; it tries to get even, to settle the score, to seek revenge. How many movies are based on the idea of revenge? Countless, because it appeals to our sinful nature. Society tells us the do the same thing—to make someone pay for what they’ve done. We are told it’s a sign of weakness to forgive someone; if we have any sort of self-respect at all, then we need to stand up for ourselves and make someone feel how they made us feel. And if we can make someone wallow in the guilt of their actions, well, then, somehow that eases your pain just a little (or so the lie goes). We seek some sort of satisfaction, that even if I can’t get back at the one who wronged me by doing the same thing, I can at least withhold forgiveness.

We are bitter people by nature. We resent those who have done us wrong, if that bitter resentment smolders, it can quickly ignite into a burning rage at the slightest misstep by another. Rage then turns into a long-lasting biting anger. And anger quickly turn into slander and other kinds of evil. And all of this starts when we fail to forgive. Why do you think there is so much hate in our world today, why are all the riots, vicious personal attacks, and so on are happening all over? Because people fail to forgive others and instead seek to get even in some way.

We are all guilty of refusing to forgive someone. We are like the unmerciful servant in our gospel for today, who just had his large debt forgiven by his master. But then he went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a far less substantial debt; and when that other servant begged for mercy he didn’t receive it. Instead he was thrown in jail. That’s us—all of us by nature, we often fail to forgive, instead we hold grudges and seek to get even in one way or another.

And in doing so, we condemn ourselves. What does Jesus say at the end of our gospel? The unmerciful servant was thrown in jail, presumably for the rest of his life. And Jesus says, **This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart.** Eternal damnation—it’s what we deserve when we refuse to forgive others.

We pray the same thing in the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, **forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us**. Yes, it's a prayer for forgiveness, but it's also a prayer to help us forgive others—and if we refuse to forgive someone—we are asking God not to forgive us. We often miss that part of the prayer—we are saying, “Dear Lord, if I refuse to forgive someone as I should, you should not forgive me too.”

Because we are so revengeful by nature, the Lord encourages us—even commands us to forgive others. He does so again and again on the pages of Scripture, including in verse 32 of our text, **be kind and compassion to one another, forgiving one another**. Or think of Jesus' conversation with Peter that began our gospel. Peter came up to him and asked him how often he had to forgive someone when they sinned against him, up to seven times? Think about that for a second, can you imagine someone sinning against you seven times and you forgive them each and ever time? That's pretty good, isn't! Most people would have thrown in the towel after the second time, so seven times certainly is impressive.

But that's enough, Jesus says; not only seven times, but 77 times! Seven is a number of completeness. 77 has two sevens in it—so the idea here is a complete number. Whenever someone sins against you and repents we are to forgive them. In fact, it doesn't really matter how many times you forgive someone, if you are keeping track of the exact number of times, then you miss the point. You simply forgive those who sin against you!

But why would you do that? Why would you forgive someone again and again when they sin against you? Isn't that weak? Isn't that foolish? Don't you have to stand up for yourself? The answer is simple—we forgive because Christ first forgave us. Verse 32 of our text says in full, **be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven us**.

We forgive others just as God has forgiven us. And how has he forgiven us? Through his Son, Jesus. It was Jesus who forgave our sins by shedding his holy, precious blood on the cross. His sacrifice on the cross covered over all our offenses. All of our sins were placed on Jesus who took all the guilt of all our sins upon himself and suffered the punishment we deserve. He died for us and suffered through hell in our place. Jesus' perfect life has been credited to us—and as a result God no longer sees our sins, but he sees the perfect life of Jesus. So our sins aren't counted against us, they won't come back to haunt us or condemn us.

We are guilty, but we have been granted a favor from God, our judge. It's a gift of grace—not something we have earned or can ever deserve. A gift coming to us out of love that he would not treat us as our sins deserve or make us repay for what we've done. But he has released us from the guilt of all our sins on account of Jesus who took it all upon himself and paid the price for our sins.

In the last verse of our text Paul writes, **Christ loved us and gave himself for us, as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God**. The temple of Jerusalem was not like our sanctuaries today. In many ways it would have resembled a slaughter house—all day long sacrifices were being made to the Lord; people were bringing in animals, and grain, and other offerings to be burned on the fire of the altar to the Lord. Imagine all the sights and sounds of the temple. And then there was the smell—the smell of blood, of burned hair, or burning grain, of burning flesh. It probably wouldn't have been too pleasant to say the least! But to the Lord, it was a pleasing aroma because that scent meant a people who were praising and honoring him!

These Old Testament sacrifices were substitutionary offerings. The animal was sacrificed in place of those that offered it; it's death and the shedding of its blood paid the price in place of the sinners who offered it. That's Jesus' sacrifice to us—a substitutionary sacrifice, a price paid for us.

The debt we owed for our sins was too great for us to pay, impossible for us to ever make up—the price is eternal damnation for each and every one of our sins, and we sin far too often per day to even keep track, but over a life time, it's impossible for us to ever pay. That's the point of Jesus' parable in our gospel for today. The first servant, the unmerciful one, he stood before his master with a debt that was far too great him to possibly pay. Jesus used a nice round number of 10,000 talents. But how much is a talent? A talent is six thousand denarii; and a denarius was a days' wage for a common laborer. So here we have 60 million days' wages. And if you put it in today's money—let's say on the conservative side that a laborer makes 100 dollars a day, then we are talking about six billion dollars. That's an impossible sum for a servant to ever repay. This servant, then, should have been thrown into jail for failing to repay his debt. But the master, in an act of mercy decided to cancel the debt of his servant, who left free and jumping for joy! In this parable, God is the master, who forgives our impossible debt in an act of mercy! Again, it's a gift of God's grace, not earned or deserved, but a gift of grace that he takes the debt we owe and completely forgives that debt!

All of this is our motivation. Paul tells us so to begin chapter five, **be imitators of God as his dearly loved children. And walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.** We love one another just as God love us. God's love is an unconditional and self-less love. In the same way we love others with an unconditional love, not treating them as their sin's deserve or making them pay for what they have done. Instead we forgive them, we treat them with love just as God has loved us! To walk in love is to live your life in every way with love—not with bitterness, anger, or slander. A great example for us to follow is not only Christ, but also Joseph from our first lesson today. Joseph's brothers, in a fit of jealousy and rage, committed a horrible sin against him. They sold him into slavery when he was only 17. God used this horrible act for good, he moved the chess pieces of history which led to Joseph becoming the second in command in all of Egypt, the most powerful country in the world at the time. He was in charge of first collecting and then selling grain before and during a great famine, saving many lives. Even his Father and his brothers had to come to Egypt for grain in order to survive. Joseph not only gave them grain, but he also gave them a great land in Egypt and they thrived. Years later, after his Father Jacob died, the brothers came to Joseph, in fear that now that their Father had died, he would finally make them pay for what they had done to them. But Joseph cried when his brothers came to him. It never even occurred to him to do such a thing; that was in the past and he was simply happy to have his brothers again. He had forgiven his brothers long ago; he had seen God's hand in everything and he had no intentions of making his brothers pay. He spoke kind words to them and promised to treat them well.

Who has done you wrong? What did they do—was it worse than selling you into slavery? Probably not! And even if it was—even if it was something like murder or adultery, that wouldn't matter. How many times has someone sinned against you—is it more than your sins against God? Of course not! So we forgive like Joseph, we love and forgive like the Lord! Far too often we hold bitter grudges, we try to get even. But in Christ we are fully and freely forgiven. So we strive as best as we can to forgive others just as Christ has forgiven us in love. Amen.