

**A Series on Ephesians**  
**Sub-Series: Gospel Driven Change**  
“From Bitterness to Forgiveness”  
**(Ephesians 4:31-32)**  
**June 20, 2010**  
**by Kevin Haah**



**I. Introduction**

Good morning! Welcome to New City!

Vision statement (re gospel and grace not justice)

We've been studying through Ephesians. We are in a middle of a series called Gospel Driven Change.

Last week, we talked about anger. It was more focused on day to day anger that we face. Today, we are going to talk about more deep seated anger—bitterness and forgiveness. For some of us, it is a much more difficult issue.

Let's read Ephesians 4:31-32:

<sup>31</sup> **Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger** (quick explosive anger and long lived anger: these words were used together by general to show the two angles of anger), **brawling** (shouting) **and slander, along with every form of malice** (evil). <sup>32</sup> **Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving** (giving grace) **each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**

We are going to look at (1) What is bitterness; (2) How do we overcome bitterness; and (3) How do we do this in real life.

**II. What is Bitterness?**

Bitterness is what you feel when you harbor resentment against someone for some time. You're holding a grudge. That person did something to you. You may not be acting on that resentment, but your heart harbors this bitter feeling. It's not quite hate, but more resentment. You can feel this way towards people you love. It builds up. It eats you up from the inside. It can imprison you with hate and anger. The thing about it is that it simmers inside of you and sometimes, it comes out in unexpected ways.

When that person is around, you have a tendency to bring it up. When your spouse or friend did something nominally wrong, you get angry quickly. You experience rage and anger. Why? It's not just that wrong, it was the totality of things that person did that you've been bitter about. Do you have an anger problem? I think one of the causes of your anger problem is a bitterness problem. You can't let go of the resentments.

When that person is not around, you tend to slander them to other people. I think one measure of whether you feel bitter towards a person is if you can wish them well and talk about them as a human being. Do you long for their redemption or are you unable to help but to tell stories of their hurtful behavior?

Sometimes, we say, I've forgiven them but I'm never going to forget. The Scriptures say that when God forgives, he forgets. I am not sure if that means he actually forgets. God is omniscient and I think it is impossible for him to not know everything. So, I think he is saying that he is going to act as though we didn't do it. So, to forget means to act as through it did not happen.

When you say, I forgive but I am not going to forget, you are essentially saying, I am not going to be the executioner, but I am going to be the judge. I am going to condemn you and sentence you, but I am not going to hurt you back. I am going to harbor in my heart what you did even though I am not going to act on it. That's a classic definition of bitterness.

### **III. How Do We Overcome Bitterness?**

Verse 32 says: **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”** In the original language, it literally says “give grace” “just as in Christ God gave grace to you.” This passage doesn't say to be kind and compassionate to those who are kind and compassionate to you. It doesn't say forgive others if they forgive you. The assumption here is that you feel bitter towards them, they make you angry, you end up in a shouting match, and you have nothing good to say about them. Yet, the Scripture teaches us to be kind and compassionate and forgive. In

essence, it teaches us to be kind and compassionate and forgive not because they deserve it but because God is like that to you.

But, this is so hard because it seems so unfair. It's so unnatural. If you read the OT, there is the story of Joseph. He had eleven brothers. They didn't like Joseph. They planned on murdering him but ended up selling him off as a slave. He spent the best years of his life in the dungeons of Egypt. Although he went through extreme hardship, somehow God used the terrible situation and turned it into something good. Joseph ended up becoming the right hand man of Pharaoh. And because of a famine, his brothers came to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph was in charge of the grain. The brothers didn't recognize Joseph, but Joseph recognized his brothers. The way he acted towards his brothers is weird. At one time, he acted harshly and threw his brothers in jail. The next moment, he seemed overcome with sorrow, left to blubber like a drunk. He played tricks on his brothers, hiding money in the grain sacks, seizing one as a hostage, accusing another of stealing his silver cup that he planted. For months, and possibly for years, he struggled with his emotions for them. I think he wanted to forgive his brothers but he couldn't do it. I think this story is a very realistic portrayal of how difficult it is to forgive someone. Then, Joseph couldn't go on any longer. He called his brothers and told them who he was and forgave them. When grace finally broke through to Joseph and he was able to give grace to his brothers, he and his brothers couldn't help but weep, kiss, and embrace one another. He didn't just go from seeing his brothers again and forgiving them. He went through a period of grief and agony, and decided to go against the most natural feelings of finally going after them.

Why should we forgive if it goes against every primal instinct we have? If it is so unnatural and unfair? Let me give you some practical reasons and some theological reasons:

*(1) Forgiveness alone can stop the vicious cycle of blame and pain.*

There is a book by Gabriel Garcia Marquez called *Love in the Time of Cholera*. In the story, a marriage breaks down because of a bar of soap. It was the wife's job to keep the house in order. One day, she forgets to replace the soap. Her husband mentions the oversight in an exaggerated way: "I've been bathing for almost a week without any soap." She vigorously denies she forgot. Even after she finds out that it was her fault,

her pride is hurt and she can't get herself to back down. For the next seven months, they sleep in separate beds and eat in silence. Even when they grow old, they are careful about talking about this issue because the wounds never closed. How can a bar of soap ruin a marriage? Because neither partner would say, "Stop. This can't go on anymore. I'm sorry. Forgive me." Forgiveness is the way to stop the cycle of blame and pain.

Often if we don't forgive, we become imprisoned in bitterness and anger. And that causes the other person to react to your bitterness, causing more bitterness and anger. It just builds up until the relationship is broken. If the basis for all of our relationships was fairness, we would not have any relationship left. You might disagree with me. "I give everyone what they deserve. If they are nice to me, I am nice to them. If they screw me, I screw them. I am fair." This leaves no room for the reality that you and I are more messed up than we think we are. We are going to make mistakes. What if you had a bad day? What if they touched your sensitive spot and you overreacted? What if you touched their sensitive spot and they overreacted? There are all kinds of ways in which two good people can destroy a relationship if it is built on the foundation of fairness only. There will not be a relationship because every real relationship is messy, because everyone is messed up to a certain degree. You will end up alone, detached, without love.

When we take the step of forgiving, we find that it liberates us. Lewis Smedes wrote a book on forgiveness and he said: "The first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who does the forgiveness.... When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner we set free was us."

*(2) Forgiveness has the power to break through the hard calloused heart of the forgiven person. It has the power to dramatically change people.*

In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable*, Jean Valjean, is put into prison for 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread. By the time he gets out, he is a bitter, hardened criminal. In a way, his life is in bondage to bitterness and hate. When he was struggling, without a place to go because no one wanted to have anything to do with a criminal, a very kind bishop invites him to stay at his home. At night, Valjean decides to steal the silverware from the bishop's house and run away. But, he is captured by the police, who are

suspicious that a homeless person is carrying so many valuables. The police bring Valjean to the bishop and asks whether Valjean stole the silverware. The response of the bishop is shocking and powerful. He could have said, yes, and Valjean could end up in jail, hardening his heart even more. But, the bishop said, so good to see you, why did you leave without saying goodbye and why did you forget to take the candlesticks, and he gives Valjean the silver candlesticks. Valjean is literally flabbergasted; he is shocked. After the police leaves, he just breaks down into tears. The bishop gives grace—he forgives him even though Valjean doesn't deserve it. And, it is transformative. His experience of grace changes the direction of his life forever. Forgiveness has the power to soften the heart. Forgiveness shocks the heart, breaks the callousness and the bitterness. It leads him to say, **“My soul now belongs to God.”** Real forgiveness when it is received has the power to be transformative.

(3) Because God has forgiven us. That's what Paul said is the main motivation for forgiving: “forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.” Here, the main thing is not fighting for JUSTICE in our relationship but doing JUST AS God did. God forgave us.

In Matthew 18, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother? Jesus answers by telling him a parable about a servant who owes a king millions of dollars. He begs for mercy, and the king forgives his debt. But as the servant is going out, he bumps into a fellow servant who owes him a few dollars, and he refuses to forgive his debts even though the fellow servant begs for mercy, and even has him put into the debtor's prison. The king gets furious when he finds out and says (Matthew 18:32-33): **“You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant *just as* I had on you?”**

That's exactly what Paul is saying. We should forgive just as we have been forgiven. This forgiveness thing is at the heart of our faith. That's why we need to understand the depth of our mess and how God loves us and forgives us. If you constantly live an examined life in which you know your sins and you experience God's love and forgiveness in your life, you will learn to forgive. If you understand how much you needed to be forgiven, you will be able to forgive.

#### **IV. How Do We Do This in Real Life?**

Here are some suggestions:

- We need to consider things we have done wrong before we think about forgiving others for their wrong. Sometimes, there are things that we did wrong. Maybe it doesn't justify what the other person did, but you have to examine what you did and be honest with yourself. That's hard to do sometimes. Even if it is a minor wrong, you need to own up to what you did wrong. This sometimes helps you consider the whole situation. Our bitterness and anger have a tendency to create tunnel vision. I think one of the best ways to do this is to write out your thoughts. People who do 12 Steps are pretty good at this. Writing things out helps you think things through clearly. Then, I think we need to first ask for forgiveness for what we did wrong.
- You have to remember that forgiveness is granted before it is felt. Determine to stop replaying the video of the wrong over and over in your mind. It is a decision that we make. We can't help feel the emotion of bitterness, but we can stop dwelling on it. It sort of like the problem of lust. You can't help the lustful thoughts from coming into your mind, but you don't have to dwell on it. Martin Luther said, you can't help birds flying above you, but you don't have to let them build a nest on your head.
- Be willing to absorb the debt. When you forgive, the debt does not just disappear into thin air. You transfer the debt. You are willing to absorb the cost. You are willing to bear the cost. If you borrow \$10,000 from me, and you can't pay the debt, and I forgive you, the debt does not just disappear into thin air. I have to absorb the debt. I have to pay for the debt. There is a cost to forgiveness. There is always a cost to forgiveness. This is true even in a relational setting. When someone wrongs you, you are willing to pay for the debt. Why? That's exactly what Christ has done for you. He has paid for our debts by dying for our sins on the cross.
- Make the decision not to be the absolute judge. The Scripture says don't judge. We are not qualified to be the judge. We don't fully know what's going on in that person's life. We don't know all of the background, history, the humanity of that person. We only see the evil, not the person. Sometimes when we find out that the person we feel bitter towards is going through far more pain than we want them to go

through, it's hard to feel angry towards them. Or when you find out more about their lives. Recently, there was a play called Wicked, a story of the Wicked Witch of the West in Wizard of Oz. It is a story of how she came to be so wicked. She has a name: Elphaba. Because she was born with green skin, she was shunned. Her rebellion against the oppressive dictator Wizard of Oz was mischaracterized and misunderstood. The point is when we know everything, we are qualified to judge, and we don't know everything. You and I are not perfect. Only God can judge perfectly. So, make the decision to take yourself out of the position of being the judge. Just make the decision: I will no longer be the judge!!

- You have to do the internal work of receiving God's grace, God's forgiveness, in your life. When Jesus was invited to a Pharisee's house, this prostitute came to Jesus and started to weep and kiss his feet and wash his feet with tears. The hosts were upset by this. Jesus then told a parable of two people who were forgiven of their debts. One was forgiven for a lot of money and the other was forgiven for little. Jesus asked the Pharisee who will love him more. The answer was: the one who was forgiven much loves much. I think one of the greatest hindrances to forgiveness is thinking that I am a good person and I don't need much forgiveness. I can stand on my works. I have not done the bad things that other people have done. I think we need to remember that there are two ways to sin: one is to sin like the younger brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Go sleep with prostitutes, do drugs, and then end up in jail or the streets of skid row. Or the other way to sin is to be like the elder brother: think that somehow you are better than other people and look down upon them with pride and bitterness. Both were trying to run away from God: one by doing bad things, and the other by doing good things.

As we have a relationship with God, we find how good he is, how holy he is, how gracious he is, how willing he is to suffer for us, how he gave up the greatness of the kingdom of God and came down to us to save us. When we start having a relationship with such a person of beauty, and we see that he was willing to pay the cost of our sins to forgive us, we get compelled to forgive others.

- If you have not already communicated your forgiveness, then if it is appropriate, you should let them know through an appropriate method that you forgive him or her.

Sometimes, it means you write a letter. Sometimes, you meet with them. Sometimes, you call them. Sometimes, when the issues are complex and there is fault in both sides, you have to ask for their forgiveness.

- **What if the person continues to wrong you?**

A lot of people can forgive if the wrong has stopped or the wrong doer has asked for forgiveness, but to forgive something who is continuing the evil? Doesn't forgiveness just perpetuate the wrong?

I think every situation is different and it calls for wisdom and discernment, but here are some biblical teachings about it.

(a) You bless them as you speak the truth. Blessing means wishing something good or saying something good. But, you speak the truth. You should do it when you are calm. You should ask God for wisdom on when and how you can speak the truth in a way that is helpful.

(b) You pray for them. When you pray for them, you start to humanize them and ask for God's help in breaking through to that person.

(c) Be good to them, show grace to them, forgive them, but sometimes, you need to withdraw so that you do not enable their sin.

#### Final Story: the Hiding Place

- Corrie Ten Boom and her family secretly housed Jews in their home during WW II. Their activity was discovered, and Corrie and her sister Bessie were sent to the German death camp, Ravensbruck. There, Corrie watch many, including her sister, die.
- After the war she returned to Germany to declare the grace of Christ.
- After one of her talks, she came face to face with a man who was a guard at Ravensbruck. He was one of the crudest guards. He didn't remember her specifically. He had since become a Christian. He acknowledged how cruel he was and asked her for forgiveness.
- And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Bessie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been many seconds that he

stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

- For I had to do it—I knew that. And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.
- But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.
- "I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.