

So What?

How the Apostle Paul instructs us to live out our life as members of a the body of believers.

Part 7—Forgiving

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:12-17

At the end of World War II, America was in a unique position in the world. We were the only industrialized nation that did not suffer damage to our infrastructure or our manufacturing ability during the war. Moreover, the war industry increased our technical skills so our factories became more efficient. Because the war was largely funded through war bonds, war survivors typically had significant savings. The result was a decade, the 50s, of massive economic expansion and the rise of the dominate factor in the American economy still today—consumer spending. This created a new academic discipline—marketing. Marketers now invest billions of dollars each year trying to figure out how to sell more stuff to us.

One of the tools of marketing is the concept of the Average Joe. Each year, The Department of Commerce puts out a huge block of statistics marketers use to create the image of typical American. Want to know if you are the average Joe? Here are some recent statistics for the Average Joe (or Jane):

Gross Annual Personal Income:	\$39,339
Annual Household Income:	\$55,861
Average value of their home:	\$196,250
Average Car payment:	\$512
Average monthly household food budget:	\$370 (3.4 people per household)
Average monthly personal clothing budget:	\$297 (from shoes to laundry)

It was the last figure that jumped off the page for me. Nearly 10% of the personal income of the Average Joe is dedicated to clothing. Apparently, how we look is pretty important to us.

According to the verse above, how we “dress” was pretty important to the Apostle Paul, too. In the passage above, we are instructed to “*clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*”

What promoted this fashion advice from Paul? It comes to us from the Book of Colossians, one of about a dozen letters written by Paul to churches across the Roman empire. Colossae was a city located about 100 miles east of one of the centers of early Christian growth, Ephesus. There is no historical record of Paul ever actually traveling there. Instead, the church in Colossae was planted approximately 3 years before this letter was written by a man who had been converted to Christianity by Paul in Ephesus. His name was Epaphras. Paul shared the Good News with Epaphras, disciplined him for a period of time, then sent him to Colossae to start a new church. Typical of 3 year old church plants, much like ours, the church in Colossae seemed to be struggling with doctrinal and leadership issues. What type of church would they be and how would they be governed? The document suggests several heresies had sprung up in the Colossian church as people melded old ideas and practices into their new church. In the first 2 chapters of this work, Paul addresses the heresies: Greek speculation (chapter 2, verse 4 and 8-10), Jewish legalism (chapter 2, verses 11-17), and Asian mysticism (chapter 2, verses 18-23). In what is seemingly his most dogmatic and doctrinal work, Paul crushes these heresies by countering with an argument centered on the Christ’s place in the universe. Chapter 2, verse 9 and the following sum up the argument: “For in him dwells the fullness of the God-head bodily; you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.” Perhaps this argument could be summed up in modern language like this: “It doesn’t really matter what you think, nor does it matter how you practice your religion. And it certainly does not matter what amazing spiritual experiences you have had. What matters is this: Christ is the head of your life. You are to submit your entire self to him—body, mind, and spirit. In so doing, you become the Christian God calls you to be. Whatever you do (whatever decision you make), do it in full submission to Christ.”

At the end of the letter to the Colossians, we discover how Paul’s letters to the new churches were meant to be used. He instructs the readers to share this letter with the a neighboring church. He writes, “Now when this letter is read among you, see to it that you read it to the church in Laodicea and likewise you read the letter I sent them.” We learn two things important from this verse: (1) Paul’s letters were probably read to the churches as the sermon during weekly worship; (2) what he writes to one body is normative for all the others. This is, in fact, how these works became a part of the canon, or collection, of documents that make up the Bible. Sadly, historians and archaeologists have yet to uncover this lost letter to the Laodiceans.

Typical of the other 12 Pauline letters in the New Testament, this work turns on a key word, “Therefore...” After this word comes the “so what” of the work...what difference should this teaching make in my life. The “so what” (therefore...) passage above begins at Chapter 3, Verse 12. Here is a summary of what it says to do:

1. Change your wardrobe (how you appear to or interact with others).
2. Be forgiving.
3. Be loving.
4. Be peaceful.
5. Study the Bible.
6. Worship.

It is the second outcome, forgiveness, that is uniquely emphasized in Colossians. The other 12 letters of Paul all deal with changing the way we appear to others, being loving, being peaceful, immersing ourselves in the scripture, and worshipping “the God-head.” So it is this “so what,” forgiving that we emphasize here.

Forgiveness is central to Christian thought and practice and is actually centered on ancient Hebrew thought as well. Much of the Jewish Bible, the Christian “Old Testament,” explains how humans can gain at-one-ment, atonement, with God through religious practices by which God grants forgiveness. Jesus himself spoke frequently of forgiveness, and included forgiveness in the central prayer of the Christian church—the Lord’s Prayer or the Our Father. In the prayer, we are taught to seek forgiveness; however, Christ changes the equation. In Christian forgiveness, we apparently are only forgiven in the measure we forgive others: “forgive us our sins as we forgive the sins of others.” In the passage in Matthew where Jesus introduces the Lord’s prayer, Chapter 6, Jesus further clarifies: “If you forgive others their sins then your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others of their sins against you, neither will your heavenly father forgive you.”

It was Elizabeth O'Connor who said, "Forgiveness is a whole lot harder than any sermon makes it out to be." In his book, Letters to Malcolm, C.S. Lewis writes these words, "Last week in prayer, I discovered, or at least I think I did, that I suddenly was able to forgive someone that I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years." I take great comfort in C.S. Lewis's words as I stand here this morning to preach on forgiveness. In my own life, I find that to be such a struggle.

Dr. Ronald Scates of Central Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, in his great sermon on forgiveness, says it well: if we don't get this forgiveness thing down, then we miss the gospel. Grace, the gospel, the very heart of God; they are all wrapped up in forgiveness. There is another great passage of Scripture that opens the heart of God, that opens the heart of forgiveness to you and me. In Matthew 18, we read:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, "I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began his settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him, 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell down to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in, 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

And then Jesus finished up by saying to the apostles, and he says it to you and me here this morning: *'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.'*

There is a universal longing, a hunger in every human soul for forgiveness; both to be able to give it, and to receive it. In one of his stories, Ernest Hemingway tells about a young man who wrongs his father and he runs away from home to the city of Madrid. Out of great love for his son, the father takes out an ad in the Madrid newspaper, 'Paco, meet me Hotel Montana, 12 noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.' Now Paco is a rather common name in Spain, and so when the father gets to the hotel, he finds eight hundred young men waiting for their fathers.

We long for forgiveness: to be able to forgive and to be forgiven. If that is so, then why is it so hard to forgive? It wasn't any easier for the first followers of Jesus. Not even for the apostles. It is a dog eat dog world out there. Not a dog forgive dog world. Even the apostles are having a hard time with forgiveness.

In verse 2, Peter playing his role as spokesman for the apostles, steps forward and lays the difficulty of forgiveness there at the feet of Jesus. Maybe he thinks he is pushing the outer limits of forgiveness. Maybe he thinks he is stretching the envelope. But he comes to Jesus and says, 'Lord, when somebody tools me around, how many times should I allow that to happen before I stop forgiving them? Seven times?'

The Rabbinic teaching of that day said that when someone wronged you, you should forgive up to three times, and then you could stop forgiving. So, to be on the safe side, or maybe on the pious side, Peter doubles that and adds one more for magnanimity sake and says, 'Should I forgive him seven times, Lord?'

Jesus' answer in verse 22 is somewhat startling. 'No,' he says. 'Not seven times. Seventy seven times'. Now the literal Greek here can be translated either seventy seven or seventy times seven, which would be 490. But we are missing the whole point if we think that Jesus is talking about a literal number. No. What he is talking about here is how grace is to be operative in the life and a believer when it comes to the difficulty of forgiveness.

It is a mistake if you and I try to understand forgiveness in a clinical way. If you and I try to understand grace, which is at the heart of forgiveness, by dissecting the law, we are going to miss it. Grace is best understood by story. So, Jesus explains the grace of forgiveness to the apostles and to you and me, by telling a story. A parable. It is a parable about how citizens of heaven are to behave when it comes to forgiveness. It is a simple, crystal-clear parable. You don't have to be a rocket scientist. You don't have to be a biblical scholar. You don't have to be a great theologian to get the point of this parable. And that is part of the difficulty.

It is a story about a king and his servant. The king has loaned his servants money, and now he's decided to call in the loan. It is pay-back time. Now servant A is the servant we first meet. He has run up an incredible tab. Ten thousand talents. That is the equivalent today of about 12 million dollars; about 150,000 years worth of salary for a common day laborer back in the first century; or, about the equivalent of new Royal's slugger Jose Guillan's annual salary.

The point of the parable is that this is such a vast sum, that it is a total impossibility to pay it back. We are told that in verse 25. The servant is unable to pay. So, the king in order to cut his loses, orders that the servant and his wife and his children are all to be sold into slavery, and then the servant's entire estate be put on the auction block. At least the king can salvage a little bit of money out of this deal.

In verse 26, desperate, the servant begins to beg for mercy. He is trying to buy some time. He is hoping that the king will cut him some slack. So, he pleads literally for his very life. And then the most unexpected, unbelievable thing happens in verse 27. The king doesn't just buy him some time. He doesn't just cut him some slack. He totally forgives the debt. He cancels it in its entirety. Suddenly servant, wife, children, estate are off the auction block. The loan is paid off. They are completely free.

Now, put yourself in that servant's shoes for just a moment. How would you be feeling at that moment? How do you think you would leave there? When somebody lets you in traffic, aren't you more likely then to let another person in? You see, that is the problem with this servant. After all of that forgiveness, he leaves as if nothing has happened.

Enter servant B. Servant B owes servant A. He owes him 100 denarii we are told; the equivalent today of \$1.80. And right like out of a scene from "The Godfather", servant A, black shirt white tie, puts down his violin case and starts choking servant B and says, 'I am going to break your kneecaps unless you pay up.' Servant B begs for mercy, using the exact same words that servant A used with the king. But this time there is no mercy. Servant A shows him no mercy; instead, he has servant B thrown into debtor's prison until he can work off the debt. Boo!!! Hissss!!! This guy is a real jerk, isn't he?!

But there are always other eyes watching. And we are told that some of the other servants observe what servant A does to servant B. They get royally ticked off, and so they squeal to the king. And for the second time servant A is called onto the king's carpet. Whereas before the king had changed from loan shark to Mr. Softie, this time his pity has changed to anger, and he lowers the boom on servant A. Servant A winds up in prison. The story is over for servants A and B. But it is not over for Peter. It is not over for the apostles, and it is not over for you and me. In verse 35 Jesus says, 'Unless you and I forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart, we are going wind up just like servant A.'

This is a parable about us and our relationship with God, and our relationship to each other in terms of forgiveness. And oh, how God has forgiven the debt that you and I have run up! Far greater than 12 million dollars. Our sin has run up a tab whose result is eternal death, infinite separation from God, hell. Those are the consequences to the debt that you and I owe. If you and I could be crucified 12 million times, it would not even scratch the surface of paying off the interest on that debt, let alone even touching the principle. Yet God, in his unfathomable love and grace, has canceled it through the life, death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has totally forgiven that debt in its entirety. Not only that, but you and I come out on the other side, with the gift of eternal life.

Back in 1935, Fiorello La Guardia, Mayor of New York, visited a night court in the poorest ward of the city. He relieved the judge for the evening and took the bench himself. A case came up where a grandmother had been arrested for stealing bread to feed her grandchildren. La Guardia said, 'You are guilty, and I have got to punish you. Ten dollars or ten days in jail.' And then LaGuardia himself pulled out a 10 dollar bill out of his pocket and threw it in his hat. And then he fined everybody in the courtroom for living in a city where grandmothers have to steal bread to feed their grandchildren. They passed the hat and that woman left the courthouse that evening. She left not only with her fine totally paid, but with 47 dollars and 50 cents in her pocket.

Now don't you think it is more likely that she left that courtroom in a spirit of forgiveness; a greater probability that she would show mercy to those she met? Friends, you and I are going to get tooled around in our lives many times, by many people. People are going to do us wrong. Some of them are going to come to us and ask us to forgive them; and some of them are going to be pretty awful people who have done some pretty awful things to us. Most of them, if not all of them, don't deserve to be forgiven. So, you and I as Christians are always confronted with the choice. Am I going to seize on the pain? Am I going to seize on the pride, and withhold forgiveness? If so, Jesus says you and I are just like servant A, and we are going to wind up in prison. Prisons of anger and hatred and depression and guilt that we build for ourselves.

God really does have this obsessive thing about forgiveness. So much so, that he mandates it in this text for the Christian. He orders it. And just like any other mandate in Scripture, forgiveness is primarily mandated for our own good. Because God knows. He knows that you and I will never really be healed; we will never really move toward wholeness; we will never really get on with our lives until we are able to let go of the resentment; until we can give up gaining revenge . . . and forgive.

But God mandates it. And what Christ orders, the Holy Spirit empowers. The mistake you and I make a lot of the time is we look at who the person is who has wronged us, and we look at what they have done to us. This parable reminds you and me, that that is a mistake. When we have been wronged, we need to look at who God is, and what God has done for us.

The way that you and I are to relate to folks who have wronged us, is that we are to act like God toward them. We are to forgive them. Not because of who they are or what they have done; but because of who God is, and what God has graciously done.

It is all about grace. It is all about grace, and grace says, 'I won't give her what she deserves, I will forgive her.' Have you honestly thought about what you are asking God to do in the Lord's prayer? You and I are asking God to treat us, to forgive us, exactly the way that we deal with other folks who have wronged us.

How far are you and I to go with this forgiveness thing? In his wonderful book entitled *What Is So Amazing About Grace*, Phil Yancey tells the story of Simon Wiesenthal. "In 1944, Wiesenthal was a young Polish prisoner of the Nazis. He had looked on helplessly as Nazi soldiers killed his grandmother on the stairway of her home, and as they forced his mother into a freight car crammed with elderly Jewish women. All together, 89 of his Jewish relatives would die at the hands of the Nazis. Wiesenthal himself tried without success to commit suicide when first captured.

On a bright sunny day as Wiesenthal's prison detail was cleaning rubbish out of the hospital for German casualties, a nurse approached him. 'Are you a Jew?' she asked hesitantly, then signaled him to accompany her. Apprehensive, Wiesenthal followed her up a stairway and down a hallway, until they reached a dark, musty room, where a lone soldier lay, swathed in bandages. White gauze covered the man's face, with openings cut out for mouth, nose, and ears. The nurse disappeared closing the door behind her to leave the young prisoner alone with the spectral figure. The wounded man was an SS officer, and he summoned Wiesenthal for a deathbed confession. 'My name is Karl,' said a raspy voice that came from somewhere within the bandages. 'I must tell you of this horrible deed; tell you because you are a Jew.'

Karl began his story by reminiscing about his Catholic upbringing and his childhood faith, which he had lost while in the Hitler Youth Corp. He later volunteered for the SS, and served with distinction and had only recently returned, badly wounded, from the Russian front. Three times as Karl tried to tell his story, Wiesenthal pulled away as if to leave. Each time the officer reached out to grab his arm with a white, nearly bloodless hand. He begged him to listen to what he had just experienced in the Ukraine.

In a certain town abandoned by the retreating Russians, Karl's unit stumbled upon a booby-trap that killed 30 of their soldiers. As an act of revenge, the SS rounded up 300 Jews, herded them into a three-story house, doused it with gasoline, and fired grenades at it. Karl and his men encircled the house, their guns drawn to shoot anyone who tried to escape. 'The screams from the house were horrible,' he said, reliving the moment. 'I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were afire. By his side stood a woman, doubtless the mother of the child. With his free hand, the man covered the child's eyes, and then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the woman followed. Then from the other windows fell burning bodies. We shot. Oh God.'

All this time, Simon Wiesenthal sat in silence letting the German soldier speak. Karl went on to describe other atrocities, but he kept circling back to the scene of that young boy with the black hair and dark eyes falling from a building, target practice for the SS rifles.

'I am left here with my guilt,' he concluded at last. 'In the last hours of my life, you are with me. I do not know who you are. I know only that you are a Jew, and that is enough. I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again, I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know whether there were any Jews left. I know what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.'

Simon Wiesenthal, an architect in his early 20's, now a prisoner dressed in a shabby uniform marked with a yellow star of David, felt the immense crushing burden of his race bear down on him. He stared out the window at the sunlit courtyard. He looked at the eyeless heap of bandages lying in the bed. He watched a bluebottle fly buzzing the dying man's body, attracted by the smell. 'At last I made up my mind,' Wiesenthal writes. 'And without a word I left the room.'

Simon Wiesenthal, you and I, are servant A in that parable that Jesus tells. How far are you and I willing to go with this forgiveness business? You and I have been fooled around, we have been hurt. We have been wounded. In little ways, in catastrophic ways. And deep down inside of us, our gut tells us that there is a limit. There is a limit. There is someone this very day who needs to hear you and I say, 'I forgive you.' Not just with our mouths, but with our hearts.

Simon Wiesenthal is someone who has yet to meet Jesus Christ, who has yet to know the utter joy of having an eternal, infinite burden of debt lifted off of his shoulders. But you and I, we are here because we say we know Jesus. We gather here on Sunday morning because we say we have surrendered our lives to him. So forgive me. Forgive me for asking the question, 'What difference will that make the next time you and I run into servant B?'