

<sup>29</sup> *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.* <sup>30</sup> *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.* <sup>31</sup> *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.* <sup>32</sup> *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

<sup>5:1</sup> *Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children* <sup>2</sup> *and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4:29-5:2)*

### **The Inside and the Outside of Forgiving**

Did you ever see the Disney movie *Inside Out*? It's kind of a clever movie. It shows you what's going on *inside* the head of a young girl named Riley by treating her emotions like each one was a separate person. So you get to meet Joy and Sadness and Anger and so on. For most of the movie, you see those emotions inside but every so often, the movie pulls back and shows you what's going on *outside* in Riley's life. You see how those feelings drive the choices Riley makes. But they're also reacting to the things that are happening to Riley. So outside, Riley's family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco and inside her emotions are all jumbled up, trying to make sense of what's going on outside. One of the things I really liked about the movie was the fact that Riley doesn't always understand her emotions, so she does things that don't make sense, even to her. She couldn't have explained why she made the choices she made. She just knew she didn't like the way things were and she reacted. Every bad choice she makes complicates things both on the outside and on the inside.

I don't mean to sound like a commercial for a Disney movie, but the passage we have before us from the book of Ephesians makes me think of that movie. You see, St. Paul talks about what happens on the inside and

on the outside of us Christians. These verses are really a small part of a long section in which Paul is giving us directions on living a Christian life. He mentions a number of different things we could talk about today, but I want to zero in on one thing that he brings up: forgiving other people. The Bible talks about that a lot because it's hard for us. So this morning, I want to look at what he says and explore **the inside and the outside of forgiving.**

Let's start with the **outside.** At the very end of the reading, St. Paul tells us to **“walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.”** The Bible often pictures our lives in terms of us walking on a path. Walking in the way of love is more action and attitude than it is emotion. The image of walking implies what we do. Walking the path of love is about how we treat other people. In this reading, Paul tells us to do things. He talks about the words we use. He tells us get rid of unwholesome speech and to say only those things that build other people up. And he tells us to forgive each other, just as in Christ, God forgave us. Now, how is forgiving an outside thing? Well, what does it mean to forgive someone? I think many of us are confused about this. Forgiving someone does not mean, at least not first of all, that we stop hurting or being angry. It can be a strategy to help us move past hurt and anger, but forgiving is not manipulating our emotions so that we feel something different than we used to feel. It's not even “letting go” of our anger or our hurt. At its heart, forgiveness is a choice. It's giving up our rights to revenge.

The most common image that the Bible uses for forgiveness is a king pardoning someone. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus uses a related image: a king cancels a debt. Those are outside things. The king makes a decree. The man in parable owed ten thousand talents of gold. If you actually figure out how much money that is, it's millions of dollars. It's a debt that no one could ever pay. The king simply cancels the debt. That's what the servant fails to do when he meets another servant who owes him a few thousand dollars. The king even asks him why he didn't show mercy – not feel mercy. While the king and servant acted the way they

did because of what they felt on the inside, the canceling or the refusal to cancel the debt happened on the outside.

It's the same for us. We'll talk about our feelings on inside in a minute. But one of the things I see when I counsel couples who have problems or other people who are angry is that we think that forgiving someone is supposed to mean that I'm not angry or hurt anymore, like I have a switch inside of me that I can just flick off. You know what? That's almost never true, especially if you have to forgive someone for something that really hurt. God is not commanding us to flip an emotional switch. He's commanding us to acknowledge that he forgave all that debt of ours and now we need to forgive the debts of those around us. That begins by releasing the person who hurt us from an obligation to be punished or to pay us back for our emotional hurt. Now, that's a lot easier to do when the person is sorry and they want to be forgiven. But in the end, forgiveness is a choice we make to release that person from whatever we think they still owe us. It's an action that takes place between two people. So it happens outside, where two people can see it, or at least, hear it.

So, if it's that simple, why don't we all do it all the time? Because of what's happening on the **inside**. Forgiveness is hard because of the way we feel about it. We are angry or hurt. How angry or how hurt we are on the inside affects how hard it is for us to release the person on the outside. What makes it harder? How seriously were you hurt? It's much easier to forgive a little thing than a big thing. If someone bumps into you in the grocery store, even during this time of COVID precautions, it's easier to forgive that than if someone burns your house down. Another factor is how often someone has hurt you. Even a fairly big thing can be forgiven if the person in question has always been kind to you. But if someone has a history of doing or saying things that hurt you, or worse, if they do the same thing that hurts you over and over again, that's harder to forgive. Of course, an accident is much easier to forgive than someone hurting you on purpose.

Then there is the person who hurt you. If it was someone really close to you, that's actually harder to forgive than a stranger. Hand in hand

with that is your expectations of that person. If you trusted that person, if you never expected that person to hurt you, you're far less likely to forgive them than a person you never thought would do any better. So if your spouse cheats on you, that's pretty hard to forgive. They promised to be faithful and you believed them and loved them. It might be harder to forgive your spouse than the person that he or she cheated with, especially if you hardly know that person.

One more thing that affects how hard it is for us to forgive is the simple question of whether or not that other person is sorry. Have they asked to be forgiven? Have they expressed their sorrow to you? It's a lot easier to forgive someone who does that than someone who doesn't seem to care how much you hurt. All those things happen outside us but change the way we feel inside. The depth of our feeling on the inside is what makes forgiving people hard.

And yet God says, **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”** God commands us to forgive, just as we were forgiven. If we don't, we sin. Like all other sins, if we wallow in that sin, if our lives revolve around that sin, eventually it will destroy our faith. But notice God's reason for us to forgive: because Christ has forgiven us. The very next verse says, **“Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”** God calls us to copy Jesus. Jesus didn't just shrug his shoulders and let us off the hook. He laid down his life. He paid for all our sins. He suffered the death and the hell we deserve so that God will forgive us. If we have any other attitude toward those who have hurt us, it's sin.

Does that make you uncomfortable? It should. Forgiving is one of the hardest things we have to do in this life. People really do hurt us. Sometimes, we hang on to that hurt for years on end. Sometimes, we think about it and repeat it back to ourselves, over and over again, when we're driving or sitting at home or mowing the grass. The more we think about it, the more we focus on the part that really bothered us, and you know what happens? We actually start to make it worse. We begin to

blur the details and turn that wrong into a cartoon version of it. In time, we can convince ourselves that the person who hurt us is evil incarnate and they deserve nothing but punishment. But you know what? That's what we all deserve for our sins. That is God's point. None of us started out walking the path of love. None of us is able to keep our feet on that path all the time. We sin every single day. Every one of our sins deserves God's punishment in hell. Our refusal to forgive is just another example. So how dare we hold onto grudges?

But we do, don't we? That's the reality of the human heart. It's why Jesus came. God forgives even our refusal to forgive. God forgives all that's wrong and twisted and confused on the inside of us that makes it impossible for us to do what he commands on the outside. God forgives our grudges and our hard hearts and our insistence on repeating those sins over and over again. He forgives us because Jesus walked the path of love in our place. Think about when those Roman soldiers were nailing him to a cross. Those soldiers had mocked and tortured him for hours already and they weren't even close to done yet. They certainly weren't sorry. But what did Jesus pray? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." My friends, that was more than just an example of what we're supposed to do. It was Jesus being perfect in our place, forgiving people who had truly hurt him and who hated him. It was Jesus loving his enemies so that God can see us as people who walk the path of love and who forgive all those who wrong us.

Then Jesus died on that cross. He suffered the hell there that our hard hearts deserve. He suffered all the punishment for our sinful pride that refuses to let go of what people have done to us, that insists that they pay. His blood flowed for all our sins and all our hard hearts. Jesus paid for all that sin, once and for all. He took it all away. He died and he rose and God has forgiven us. God even sent me here to say that to you today: you are forgiven for Jesus' sake, even for how hard it is to forgive.

Now, God calls us to forgive. He calls us to release those who have hurt us from the debt they owe us, to release them from all punishment and revenge. And yes, he knows that saying it is easier than meaning it. But he calls us to keep saying it and to keep praying for the strength to

mean it and live by it until the Holy Spirit gives us that gift. And there is a tremendous blessing that God gives us when we do forgive: peace. The devil loves it when we hang on to anger and hurt. He loves the hatred that rises in our hearts. He loves the pride that focuses on me and what I've suffered. He uses that to torture us here and he tries to use it to destroy our faith. But when we hear again that Jesus has forgiven us for the sin of refusing to forgive, we have that peace and comfort. And when we make the choice to forgive and live in peace with others, our own hearts slowly heal. We remove the temptation to pride and sin, but we also remove the torment of being locked in conflict and anger. That, too, is a gift of God that comes from following his will for our lives. The strength to do it comes from knowing that we are forgiven. It comes from knowing God's love in Christ and being humble before our God. Trust Jesus and walk the path of love and forgive from the heart, just as God has forgiven you. Amen.