

Bear with and Forgive One Another

In the last couple of lessons in our “Heaven Bound Together” series, Shawn and I have primarily considered the way that Christians are supposed to help each other through life’s struggles. We’re supposed to encourage. We’re supposed to restore. We’re supposed to bear one another’s burdens. Generally, we’re supposed to help solve one another’s problems.

However, that leaves a giant issue unexplored. If other Christians are supposed to help us with our problems, what are we supposed to do when the other Christian is the problem? Let’s be real, friends. Sometimes, the worst problems that we have are with people who worship with us. Our brothers and sisters in Christ can be annoying, hard-headed, and even downright sinful.

This can be intensely frustrating, but we must remember that our responsibilities toward one another don’t end because we think another Christian isn’t acting right. Instead, we’re supposed to work through even that situation with them. This morning, then, let’s look at our role in bearing with and forgiving one another.

In this important work, we have to **START WITH THE HEART**. Consider Paul’s words in Colossians 3:12. Often, we’re prone to think how much easier it would be to get along with other Christians if only they would do what we wanted them to. Here, though, Paul reveals that the solution doesn’t begin with changing their behavior. It begins with changing our attitude.

Let me be honest, friends. To me, this is one of those texts that looks really noble and inviting until I start thinking about what I will have to do about it. We all recognize compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience as virtues that will make us more like Jesus as we adopt them.

That sounds great in theory, but it’s very difficult to apply. We all like compassion when it’s directed toward us, but we don’t find it easy to be compassionate toward the brother in Christ who has wrecked his life by being evil and stupid. We agree that kindness is a wonderful thing, but we struggle to be kind to a Christian who has treated us badly. We admire humility, but it doesn’t come naturally to us when a sister starts telling us that she knows how to run our lives better than we do. Meekness is one of the most famous attributes of Christ, but we have trouble staying meek when somebody gets in our face over something. Even patience is something we find in short supply when that extremely annoying Christian starts jumping up and down on our last nerve.

The point is, friends, that if we want to live up to this passage, we are going to have to do a lot of ruthless spiritual remodeling. When we’ve been Christians for decades, it’s easy to think that we’ve pretty well hit our mark as disciples. This is one of those texts that shows us how wrong we are. Every one of us needs to be working on

Colossians 3:12 for so long as we're on this side of the dirt, and our unity with our brethren depends on our willingness to adopt this spirit.

Once we've got the right attitude in place, we need to determine whether we need to be BEARING WITH OR FORGIVING. Here, look at Colossians 3:13. Even though they appear right next to each other, bearing with and forgiving are two different activities. We are supposed to bear with a Christian who is doing something that bothers us but doesn't amount to sin. On the other hand, forgiveness is the appropriate response when a brother sins and repents.

Sad to say, in the brotherhood, there's a lot of confusion about when each of these responses is appropriate. On the one hand, there are Christians who demand repentance when it's actually their role to bear with. On the other hand, some brethren bear with other Christians who are actively sinning and need to make a change.

The only guide to which of these two actions is appropriate is God's word. Brother Fred has done X, and we don't like it. What do the Scriptures say about his conduct? Let's say Brother Fred doesn't smell so good. The Bible has nothing to say about poor personal hygiene, so we bear with. Let's say Brother Fred is socially awkward. All of us have known annoying Christians who were as faithful as they could be. Bear with. Let's say Brother Fred disagrees with us on an issue requiring judgment—modesty, for instance. Unless Brother Fred is so off-the-wall that he's going to a nudist camp or something, we bear with. Of course, we can have conversations with brethren about any of these things, but we'd better make sure we have put on that heart of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience first!

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is something we extend only to those who have violated God's law, book, chapter, and verse, and we do this AS THE LORD HAS FORGIVEN US. I think Paul's language here is key. He doesn't say, "As the Lord has forgiven the evil people who mocked Him on Calvary." Instead, it's as He has forgiven us. Thus, we can look at the Lord's conduct toward us as the model for how we should treat one another.

This must begin with CALLING SINNERS TO REPENTANCE. Look at what the Lord does and says in Luke 5:30-32. We see Him associating here with irreligious Jews, people who were part of God's covenant but weren't faithful to it. However, He's not hanging out at Levi's house because Levi throws such a great party. Instead, He's there telling the sinners that they need to repent.

This, friends, must be the way that we treat Christians who are in sin today, especially if they have sinned against us. We need to put on that heart of compassion, we need to go to them, and we need to urge them to repent. Jesus is very plain about this in Matthew 18.

However, I fear that it is one of this is one of the most disobeyed commandments in the Bible. All too often, when one Christian sins against another, the wronged Christian doesn't go to his brother. Instead, he goes to his 20 closest friends, and all of them gossip together about what a rotten sinner the first Christian is. Friends, that doesn't solve the problem of sin. It only adds another sin to it.

Yes, just like everything else in this sermon, doing the right thing here is hard. It's hard to go to a brother and say, "What you said/did is wrong." Doesn't matter. It's still the right thing to do, indeed, the only right thing to do. If we were interested in easy, we shouldn't have become disciples of Jesus in the first place.

In this sermon, I'm not going to talk about what happens when our brother in sin doesn't listen to us. At that point, they exit the body and are no longer within the scope of a series on how we treat one another. Instead, let's look at how we should handle it when they do listen, when they say, "You're right; I blew it. I'm sorry."

In that case, if we're truly taking our cue from God, we will FORGIVE FROM THE HEART. Consider the tail end of the parable of the unforgiving servant, as recorded in Matthew 18:32-35. Of all of the wonderful things that God has done, His extension of grace toward us is among the most wonderful. Not a one of us could even have come close to making it to heaven on our own, but even though we had blown ourselves up so completely, God sent His Son to earth to die and rescue us. The debt that we owe God, the debt that we owe Jesus, is staggering. It's incomprehensible.

It also means that when someone comes to us seeking our forgiveness, we must forgive them. What's more, we can't merely mouth the words of forgiveness while still nurturing anger and bitterness in our hearts. We have to let it go, outside and inside both.

If we don't do that, if we refuse to be merciful to an erring brother, we put our own souls at risk. God is watching, friends, and if He sees us being merciless to others despite the greatness of His mercy toward us, He will withdraw that mercy. He'll basically say to us, "You think that everybody should get what they have coming to them? Fine. Enjoy spending eternity getting what's coming to you." Brethren, I am very afraid that an awful lot of baptized believers will lose their souls because they refused to forgive. Let's make sure we aren't among them.

After we have borne with and forgiven, we must be people who are UNITED BY LOVE, RULED BY PEACE. Let's read here from Colossians 3:14-15. Basically, the image Paul is using here is of spiritual clothing. All the virtues a few verses up are like different garments, but in v. 14, love is the belt that ties the whole outfit together.

The point is very simple, friends. If we want to be heaven bound together, if we want to stay together as a church, we have to love each other. Have to. There is no possible way that we are going to put up with being in the same church without

love. Sure, things might go fine in our congregation as long as there's smooth sailing, but when some disagreement arises, love is the only thing that will keep us together. This is not the love of liking, of pleasant interactions. It's the love of determination, of will, of an unconquerable desire to seek others' good before our own.

From love, we can pass to peace. Recently in my studies, I've come to a greater appreciation of how important unity is to God. Our connection with one another in the body of Christ is supposed to be a tangible sign of the invisible connection between us and our heavenly Head. God's desire to be united with us is revealed in our unity with one another. We are a people that is called to peace.

Because this is so, peace has to rule in our dealings with one another. Another Christian is hard to deal with? I'd imagine I don't have as much trouble dealing with him as God does dealing with me. I still need to strive for peace. Another Christian has wronged me? He still hasn't wronged me as badly as I have wronged God. I still need to strive for peace. If we claim to submit to the rule of God, we also must submit to the rule of peace.

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