

Community of Forgiveness

Ephesians 4:31-5:2

Scripture

³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. ^{NIV} Ephesians 5:1 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (NIV)

Main Idea

Background

Scholars see Paul's letter to the Ephesians as the letter where he most clearly unveils his theology of the church. In various ways throughout the letter, Paul explains that wherever the gospel of God's grace is at work, a community built on grace is formed.

Focus

Forgiveness assumes that when we live in community with one another we will wrong each other, misunderstand each other, and treat each other with selfishness. In short, our relationships will get broken and need fixing. Since we are sinful and imperfect people anytime we relate to each other deeply there is the possibility of relational strife.

Forgiveness is the element of community that focuses on the healing of relational conflict. We can define the forgiveness we receive from God through the gospel in this way, "The free canceling of our debt for the restoration of relationship". The gospel is the model and the means of our own forgiveness. Forgiveness breaks through the relational "debt" we create in wronging each other by pursuing the restoration of the relationship over our own rights/reputation, our need for payback, and our own fears of being hurt again.

Starters

- How do you most often handle conflict (fight or flight)? Why do we so often react in one of these two ways to our relational conflict?

Discussion

Q1: What kinds of things make you the most angry in your relationships? What is the source of our bitter thoughts, our anger and our acts of malice (def. a wicked intention to do an injury) in our relationships (4:31)?

A1: I would recommend that you ask this question in two parts, pausing and allowing response after the first part. The second question may require a little digging to get beneath the surface. The intention of the question is to provoke some discussion on why we get angry or bitter and act out by slandering other people or doing some type of injury to them (verbal attack, avoidance, etc). What do we gain (or think we will gain) from being bitter? What satisfaction does it give us to slander another person? It sure sounds evil as I'm writing all this down so, what is behind all this?

One way to think about the source of our anger and malice is our relational pride and our relational pain:

Much of our anger and harmful response is due to a prideful and inflated view of ourselves. "How could they do that to me? To ME? I am after all...ME!!" We put ourselves in the place of God, forgetting the pain we have caused others. We demand others pay for how they have harmed us.

But much of our bitterness and anger is also due to the pain and the hurt others cause us. We want to avoid further pain so we inflict pain. The cycle of anger continues and the relationship breaks down. It is ironic that at the source of all this relational destruction is the hunger for relationship. Or else why would it hurt us to be mistreated?

Q2: How does 4:32-5:2 point us to the gospel as the model and the means of forgiving one another?

A2: The command to be kind, compassionate and forgiving is grounded in the gospel. We can only be kind, compassionate and forgiving if we have experienced the God who is kind, compassionate and forgiving toward us.

(Model) The gospel tells us the sobering truth that our relational debt before God was enormous. We have not loved God as we should, and we've given our love to anything but God. We've rebelled against the very commands that God gives us which outline how we are to relate to Him. But the gospel tells us that God himself still had deep kindness and compassion for us. In the ugliness of our sin, he still longed for us to be made clean and rescued from the destruction we created for ourselves. So Jesus came to take all of our relational debt on himself, our debt demanded death. So the debt is paid by the life of Jesus and we are reconciled to God through this sacrifice.

(Means) God gives his children the power to bear the family resemblance (5:1). We can absorb the relational debts that are created when others wrong us because our own debt has been absorbed by Jesus. We can love people in their sin (even their sin against us) because God was compassionate on us in our sin. We can give instead of take in relationships because Christ gave all of Himself for us.

Q3: Author Ken Sande says, "Whenever others wrong you, you have an opportunity to introduce them to the wonderful world of forgiveness". Sounds crazy, huh? What prevents us from seeing our relational conflicts as opportunities to 'practice the gospel'?

A3: There are many things that cloud our thinking when conflict hits. Often what happens is we lose sight completely of God and his place in our relationships. We forget the every relationship is (at least) a triad – God, the other person and us. Our relationships, even in conflict, are designed to glorify God as opportunities to live out the gospel. In conflict we become more concerned with other interests – our rights, our reputation, winning an argument, saving face, etc...

The great conflict in this world is a rebel humanity united in revolt against their Creator. The great resolution to this conflict is the gospel. All of our smaller conflicts are opportunities to play out this resolution in our lives and experience the power of the gospel.

You may want to turn to Luke 7:36-47. Here Jesus explains the difference between a repentant prostitute and a self-righteous pharisee. The difference is how they view their own need for forgiveness. The way we view our own sin before a holy and righteous God will determine our view of others and our willingness to forgive.

Q4. Peacemakers ministries offers a four-fold summary of the promises of forgiveness.

1. "I will not dwell on this incident."
 2. "I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you."
 3. "I will not talk to others about this incident."
 4. "I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship"
- a. Which one of these is hardest for you to make when you are wronged and the offender seeks your forgiveness? Why do you think that is?

b. Which one is the most comforting for you in your relationship with God? With others, when you are the offender?

A4: This question is best asked in two parts as well. Part of the intention of this question is to get the group to realize the joy and comfort these promises offer when we are the offender – first with God and then with other people. If we understand the depth of our rebellion and sin against God, these promises will be astounding. When we refuse to grant full forgiveness for wrongs done to us, we prevent the one who offended us from knowing this joy and comfort.

Q5: Read the article “We can’t Ever Be Close Again”. What is your response to this true story of forgiveness?

A5: This is a powerful story – a story everyone in the group wishes they will never have to experience. Most everyone will be thinking that this is one of the most difficult cases of forgiveness. So it is a great opportunity to rehash the points made above – “Can God give us the power to forgive even in the most difficult of cases?” “Is the gospel really that powerful”?

Prayer

If you are willing, share a relationship in your life in need of forgiveness. Either you’ve been wronged or you have wronged another (or they think you have wronged them). As a group, pray that the power of the gospel would be seen in the granting of forgiveness and the restoration of this relationship.