

Forgive Each Other
Ephesians 4:17-5:2
Sunday, September 19, 2021

Last weekend marked the 20th anniversary of 9/11. As I watched The Sports Network last week, much attention was paid to the way that sports handled 9/11.

After 9/11, everything came to a standstill. Games were cancelled. Everything was put on hold due to security issues. For athletes and coaches, the sport they had dedicated their life to seemed small and insignificant. The United States was in disbelief and grief. But very slowly things began to return. Very intentionally things began to return, especially in New York City. As games and leagues returned, there were beautiful and significant commemorations to the lives lost and the first responders that risked their lives to save others.

Out of this tragedy came this incredible call and response to unity. The United States actually seemed like “United” States!

Fast forward 20 years – in my lifetime I’ve never seen America so divided and poisoned against itself. It seems to be a nation on the brink of tearing itself in half. As I watch the incredible displays of unity that happened 20 years ago, it’s shocking to compare that to what we see of America now. Looking at America now and 20 years ago feels like looking at two very different countries.

That’s over the course of 20 years. In the course of less than two years I think we are seeing similar and shocking contrasts.

How it started . . . When COVID-19 first arrived in Canada, everything shut down. In a week everything shut down. On Thursday night, Rudy Gobert and members of the Utah Jazz test positive for COVID-19, shutting down the NBA season. On Sunday I hear over the radio that my son’s schooling will no longer be happening in person. Did anyone here drive on Whoop Up Drive in that first month of restrictions? I did. I remember driving home from the church in the middle of the day with maybe 2 or 3 other cars on Whoop Up Drive. It was eerie.

Yet during this crisis, as extra demands were placed on our health care system, there was a call and response to unity. There was a strong appreciation for one another. Every night at 7pm people would emerge from their homes, banging pots and pans in appreciation of hard-working healthcare workers. This tribute was happening around the world! We had a sense of unity and appreciation. “We’re all in this together” was posted everywhere.

How it’s going . . . Instead of pots and pans ringing out in appreciation of healthcare workers, healthcare staff must go to work with angry mobs gathered outside of hospitals. What was once appreciation has now become – at best – indifference. At worst, healthcare workers are now facing death threats. They are being yelled at and mocked by protestors at hospitals. They are being ridiculed by the very same people that they will probably have to take care of next month when they get sick with COVID-19.

We are no longer all in this together.

As people have gone from united to being enemies of those who try to save and serve us, we find that most of us, maybe all of us, are a little on edge. Our patience is shorter. We may feel hopeless and confined.

So, as I hear and read Ephesians 4, which talks about the kind of character Christians ought to have, I find myself living by the wrong things. I have the wrong characteristics.

In Ephesians, Paul writes about the transformed life we ought to have. In doing so he describes some characteristics we should not have. Lately I find myself relating more to the bad characteristics than the good ones! Here are the bad characteristics I find myself living in **The Ephesians 4 Checklist of Grumpiness:**

- ✓ **Bitterness**
- ✓ **Rage & Anger**
- ✓ **Brawling**
- ✓ **Slander**
- ✓ **Every form of malice (ill will)**
- ✓ **Hardened heart, having lost all sensitivity**

I'm there! That's me! But Jesus calls me away from those things and asks for something better. Instead of bitterness, rage and anger we're told. . .

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other. . . (Ephesians 4:32)

Instead of brawling, slander, malice, and hardened hearts we're asked to . . .

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love. . . (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Compassion! Forgiveness! Walk in the way of love! These are beautiful and high and wonderful things. But currently in our lives these things feel like ideals. They don't feel practical. They certainly don't feel possible. How can we possibly live with compassion and forgiveness in an age of outrage and anger? How can we live with compassion and love when people are obstructing hospitals?

Well, the good news is I misquoted the Bible! I left some words out of those instructions to compassion, forgiveness, and love. The fuller sentences, hopefully, make all the difference. Ephesians 4:32 says:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other. . . just as in Christ God forgave you.

"Forgive each other just as in Christ God forgave you." Ephesians 5:1-2 actually 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.

“Walk in the way of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” It's one thing to demand compassion from a broken, beat-up heart. It's one thing to demand forgiveness from someone who has been punished and hurt again and again and again. These feel like unfair requests!

It's completely something else to say “do it the same way Jesus showed us to. Do it in the same way Jesus empowers us to.”

So, let's look at the way that Jesus forgives. Let's go to the cross and see the forgiveness of Jesus on display for the entire world.

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. **Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”** And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. **(Luke 22:33-34)**

After being betrayed, after an unjust trial, after being mocked and hit, Jesus forgives saying, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” But Jesus doesn't just forgive after-the-fact.

Jesus forgives during his crucifixion. While he is being mistreated and hurt and abused, while up on the cross. He prays “Father forgive”. At the very peak of this entire incident, he prays “Father forgive”.

Jesus forgives not just after this is all over. Jesus forgives at the height of his mistreatment.

This sounds impossible. This is impossible! But this is the love and forgiveness of God on full display for the world. The same presence of God indwelling Jesus on the cross abides in us who are his followers. The same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead lives in you.

I know this still sounds like an impossible ideal. But let's think about the alternative.

When you see the images of people protesting at hospitals, harassing workers, and blocking people needing urgent medical care, where does that put you? Especially if you do not see this through a spirit of forgiveness? It takes me right back to the **“The Ephesians 4 Checklist of Grumpiness”**.

- ✓ **Bitterness**
- ✓ **Rage & Anger**
- ✓ **Brawling**
- ✓ **Slander**
- ✓ **Every form or malice (ill will)**
- ✓ **Hardened heart, having lost all sensitivity**

I feel all those things toward the people that are doing the protesting and blocking. I want to tell them exactly what to do and exactly where to go, with a detailed map and a swear filled list of instructions. And it gets me nowhere. At the end of the day, it leads me to a hardness of heart, having lost all sensitivity. These aren't good thoughts to be having! But I would be surprised if I'm the only person thinking these awful thoughts from time to time.

As Paul lists what a transformed life looks like, all forms of malice and ill don't make the "good" list. These are not good ways to think. This is not the life that Jesus is transforming us into.

I also don't look away! I don't see the situation and slink away saying, "I just can't think of this, it makes me too angry." Then I'm not advocating for the people helping us and keeping us alive!

Forgiveness ends up being our only way forward. Forgiveness takes hard work. It takes the power of Jesus in our lives.

Forgiveness exists so reconciliation can happen. So we can have right relationships with God and with one another. Jesus' death is all about reconciliation. It's all about giving us a right relationship with God. And as a result giving a right relationship with others. Forgiveness is messy. Forgiveness has a high cost to it. Yet time and time again, forgiveness is our only way forward.

So when I see the image of the people blocking our hospitals, what can I do? The only thing that comes to mind that isn't angry or vicious or malicious is "Forgive them. Father, for they don't know what they are doing."

And then instead of hating these people I do the hard work of reconciliation. Which means I highly and publicly advocate for and celebrate our healthcare workers. I advocate for those who need critical care. I also engage in difficult conversations with people, while loving them within those hard conversations. (With a reminder that not all conversations require my participation!)

Forgiveness is impossible stuff. But I don't think there's any other way forward.

We do not do it alone. We cannot do it alone. The power of God, which raised Jesus Christ from the dead, lives in you. The grace that Christ has freely given to us empowers us to forgive.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:23-24)

God, help us be people that put off the old self. Christ, teach us to forgive. "Give us grace that we do not have" in dealing with others. Help us, through our lives, to share the great hope of reconciliation that you bring to our world.