



THE EXHORTER

"And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation." Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

Date January 20, 2019

Jump Start #2260

Ephesians 4:32 *"And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."*

A very sweet Christian asked me a question the other day. With tears in her eyes, she asked, "How do I know if I have forgiven someone?" We talk about forgiving. We teach what forgiveness means. We see how God has forgiven us. But there remains that nagging feeling, "How do I know if I have forgiven?" For her, she still felt the pain. She still remembered. She wants to let it go and she wants to forgive, but images and memories make her wonder and doubt.

Forgiveness is hard. I think it was Barclay who said "forgiveness is easy until you have something to forgive." People can be cruel. Even Christians can be ugly with each other at times. In just an instant, our feelings can be crushed and the lingering results can last a long time. Simply saying, "I forgive you," doesn't really begin to let go of all the pain that has been created. It's like a parent telling one of their children, "Say you're sorry." So the child does. Is he really sorry or has he just mumbled back the words that his parents wanted to hear? We can say, "I forgive you," but has anything changed after that? And, the question remains, "How do I know if I have forgiven someone?"

Our verse today really helps. It's one of those one-two passages, that illustrates what shouldn't be and then what should be.

First, what shouldn't be. The preceding verse, verse 31, states, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." That's the starting point in determining whether or not I have forgiven. How do I feel? Six negatives are listed. Bitterness is the starting point. Bitterness is like a cancer that can eat us up. It changes us. We become consumed with bitterness. Our outlook changes, because we are bitter. Few things are right when we are bitter. It's hard to be upbeat, optimistic and hopeful while bitterness is at the wheel of our hearts. The bitter person can't move past the hurt. They see few good things in the person that hurt them. Thoughts of getting even, hurting back fills their mind. They want nothing to do with the person that hurt them. From that, things only get worse. Anger, clamor, slander and wrath are the ugly children of bitterness. That bitter spirit makes us tell our hurtful story to others. It rallies the troops for an all out assault upon the person who caused the trouble.

(OVER)

Things are said that should never be said. Trouble abounds because we can't move past the hurt.

How do I know if I have forgiven the person? Can you be around that person? Do you want to be around that person? What thoughts do you have toward that person? Now, we are beginning to see whether we have simply said "I'm sorry," like a child does, or whether we truly have forgiven.

Forgiveness changes a relationship. That's what has happened to us and God. We've gone from sinners to being adopted into His family. However, forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. I can forgive someone even if they never say that they are sorry. I can forgive someone even if he doesn't care. To be reconciled, we must come together and have an agreement to move forward. It takes one to forgive, but two to reconcile.

Second, our verse, continues the extent of how we treat others. When Paul says, let all bitterness be put away from you, he is showing that those feelings are a choice. We may not think they are, but they are. Rather than bitter, we choose to be kind. We choose to be tender. We choose to forgive. Our choice. Our terms. Our time table. Our example is as God has forgiven us.

Look at those God forgave in the Bible. The list is long. Noah was drunk. Abraham laughed at God. David committed adultery. Jacob deceived. Jonah ran. The prodigal spent it all. A woman was caught having sex with someone she wasn't married to. The list is long.

Forgiveness is based upon love and grace. It isn't deserved. It isn't expected. It isn't natural. And, it doesn't make sense. To forgive doesn't mean the memory is wiped clean. Even God remembers. That seems like a conflict because there are passages where God says I remember no more. Yet, David, long after the sinful incident, the Holy Spirit is telling a writer to tell the story. How could the Holy Spirit know this if God remembers no more? There is Paul, through inspiration, telling us in Timothy that he was formerly a blasphemer. How did the Holy Spirit remember that? To remember no more means that God no longer holds that against us. The record has been changed. The sin has been removed. Memory may recall, but God doesn't hold it against us anymore.

This helps to answer our question. How do I know if I have forgiven? You still remember the pain. Does that mean you have not forgiven? No. What do you do with that pain? Do you continually pick that scab and keep the wound fresh and keep it from healing? Do you dwell upon it often? Do you seem stuck and preoccupied with what was done?

I told my friend, to know you have forgiven is to treat the hurtful person as God would want you to. If there is a wedding and the hurtful person will be there, you still attend. To avoid it means you still have problems with that person. There is a funeral and you know the hurtful person will be there. You attend. You don't slip in at the last second and sneak out, avoiding him at all cost. That's not kind, tender nor forgiving.

The hurtful person may continue to be hurtful. They may not accept your forgiveness. The relationship may never be the same again. Some people, you just have to love at a distance. But the main thing is that you can live in freedom, hope and grace. You are not bitter anymore. You are not eaten up with this. You are not having thoughts that you know aren't right.

Forgiveness is a choice. I remember years ago talking to a Christian about forgiveness. We were walking together through a store. He was telling me how he had forgiven someone for being so hateful toward him. As we turned the aisle, there was the very person he was talking about. Amazing. I started talking to this person and turned and the Christian who was with me had turned around and gone down the other direction. He claimed he had forgiven, but his actions didn't show that. That is not how God is towards us. That is not kindness nor loving.

Pray about this subject and the person who has hurt you. Pray that you get this right. It isn't easy. Forgiving is never easy. But, we can do it, because God says so.

Roger Shouse (used by permission)