CIRCLES OF FORGIVENESS: INNER CIRCLE

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Colossians 3:12-15

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# SETTING THE CONTEXT

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul talks about the character of a Christian life. Apparently, some folks in the community had taken the message of Christ and added to it very harsh practices of self-denial. Others have gone to the opposite extreme, they have taken the freedom of Christ, and used it to justify immoral behavior. Paul seeks to correct both of these extremes by sharing Christian ethical principles. First, he set the boundaries in what not to do (Colossians 3:5-10) and then in our reading today, he got very specific about what a Christian life looks like in our everyday lives. One of the things I really appreciate about Paul is his honesty. In this description of Christian character, he takes into account that we won’t always live these principles perfectly; we will get on each other’s nerves. We will hurt each other. Paul not only acknowledges that, but he points us to the Divine Answer for our shortcomings. Finally, he assures us, no matter who you are, no matter what category you fall in, Christ makes no distinction; we can all live in his image, we can all live his character.

Read Colossians 3:12-15

# THE SERMON

Is there anyone here who has not fought with their siblings? OK, so If you are an only child, did you fight with your cousins? When our daughters were really little, one day they both came out of their room crying and calling for me. When I asked what was going on, one of them said, “Mommy, we were fighting and we both got hurt!” I thought, “man, that is so profound and so true.” **The people in our inner circle and by that I mean the people we are closest to, those we love and who love us like parents, siblings, spouses, boyfriends or girlfriends, children; they can bring us great joy, but they can also hurt us in ways a stranger can’t touch.** We have few expectations of strangers, but we have many expectations, hopes and needs from our inner circle. Last week, I used different size rocks to represent the weight of our hurts and emotional injuries; our inner circle can add rocks, from pebbles to boulders, that weigh on us and likewise we have the power to add to our loved ones’ loads. Sometimes we do it intentionally and sometimes, we do it unintentionally.

Family therapist Gary Chapman has an entire chapter on healing your family relationships in his book, *When Sorry Isn’t Enough*. He tells the story of two brothers who argued after their mother’s funeral about whether to purchase a tombstone for her and in the heat of the argument one of them said, “I never want to see you again.” They did not talk to each other again even though they lived in the same town. Both felt justified in their anger and the separation lasted for years. They were fighting and they both got hurt; they both lost not only a mother, but a brother. After thinking through what happened in a session with Chapman, the brother who made that statement did a very courageous thing, he decided to apologize to the other. He took the time and thought to write out what he wanted to say. **Different people need different things to experience an apology as genuine. Chapman calls them the languages of apology; they are expressing regret, making things right or restitution, genuinely repenting (changing your behavior), requesting forgiveness and accepting responsibility.** I did a sermon series on these languages of apology a couple of years ago and they are available on the NSUMC website. The brother thought about the language of apology his brother exhibited and made sure that was in his apology. He said it was one of the most difficult things he had ever done in his life, but when he apologized, his brother cried, and they had an honest conversation about what happened and how they’d both got hurt. Their broken relationship began to repair.[[1]](#endnote-1) **Chapman commented, “Few things are more powerful in human relationships than learning to accept responsibility for failures and to sincerely apologize to the person we have wronged.”[[2]](#endnote-2) It is powerful because it often leads to forgiveness which can repair what was broken.**

I don’t think a person has the right to demand forgiveness, that just adds to the burden of hurt. **Forgiveness is a gift we give, and a gift we receive**. What we can do, if we are the ones who caused hurt, is help bear the burden in whatever way possible with the wounded loved one. Sometimes when we both got hurt, our first reaction when we think about the process of confession, repentance and forgiveness is “well, (s)he started it!” We can continue the cycle of hurt, “(S)he hurt me or didn’t meet my need, so I’m going to hurt him/her.” We can choose to punish rather than forgive and keep the cycle going or we can be the one to start breaking the cycle by saying, “I’m sorry” first or offering forgiveness first. It takes a lot of relational strength to make that first move. One of you sent me a devotion about regret this week, in it Kathryn Schultz said, *“****Regret doesn't remind us that we did badly. It reminds us that we know we can do better****.”* If the other person refuses to accept our apology, we can know that we tried to repair the relationship to the best of our ability and that should bring us some measure of peace.

**In our Scripture reading, Paul takes into account that we will not always live up to the virtues he listed**. We will offend and wound each other from time to time. He counsels us to be tolerant with each other and forgive each other of our shortcomings and failures. “Just as the Lord forgave us, we are to forgive each other.” I think the other qualities he mentions help us do that. Compassion helps us see the situation from the other person’s perspective and to feel its impact from their viewpoint. Kindness, gentleness and grace help us accept and act with love when our loved ones also have weaknesses and shortcomings. Humility reminds us we’re all in this together, some days I need your grace and some days you need mine.

“And be thankful,” he says. **When someone is in your inner circle, it’s easy to focus on the irritations and perceived wrongs of that person, but Paul reminds us to focus on the blessings.** Rather than keeping a list of all the things they do wrong, focusing on the pebbles and rocks, write a list of how they are a blessing; write a list of what you appreciate about them. Often the same attribute that is a burden, can be a blessing depending upon the situation. Her stubbornness drives you crazy, yet that same persistence helps her overcome obstacles and difficulties. He’s so cheap, he’s always worrying about money, yet that frugalness helps his family stay financially stable. Use the lens of gratitude and thankfulness to see your loved ones. Paul says over all these things put on love. **One scholar said, “Love …functions as the knot that ties together the other graces and so gives a coherence to Christian living by supplying a drive force and motive.”**[[3]](#endnote-3) **In Christ, we are given the characteristics that we need to confess, repent and forgive.** This is such a gift. Think about the demonstration from last week and the weight of that backpack full of rocks. Now imagine two people from your inner circle each carrying that heavy weight. It hard to embrace with so much baggage. Forgiveness allows us to set down the weight.

Are there times when we should not forgive bad behavior? **Can we forgive someone and not allow them to hurt us with the same behavior over and over again?** What about forgiving boulders like serious and persistent deceit, physical, psychological or verbal abuse, infidelity?

**First, I would say that forgiving these kinds of hurts must be the choice of the one hurt.** Demanding that they forgive the one who abused them only adds to their burden, it doesn’t help them bear it. Any person carrying these kinds of hurts needs our compassion, prayers, and support.

**Secondly,** the process of forgiveness may take more time and prayer. **We may have to pray for the desire and strength to even think about forgiving the person who hurt us so deeply**- praying for that desire and allowing God to help you may be the step you can take.

**Thirdly, when there has been such a betrayal, repentance (or changed attitude and behavior) is essential for the relationship to repair and heal. It is absolutely appropriate to verify that the change has taken place.** For example, someone who has persistently deceived or had an affair could give the loved one they betrayed unlimited access to their cell phones and other devices. Rebuilding trust is a process that takes time and demonstrating faithfulness. In the cycle of abuse, the abuser will often state remorse and apology immediately after the violence, however there is no repentance for they abuse again- repentance means a change of heart that leads to changed behavior**. You may be able to set down the weight of the boulder by letting go of the anger and desire for revenge toward the offender, but to repair the relationship, so you can continue to *be* in relationship, there must be repentance.** Without a true change, the weight will continue to be added to your burden and the offender will continue to cause harm. The aim of forgiveness is not to continue being hurt, the aim of forgiveness is healing and wholeness.

**Confession, repentance and forgiveness are so powerful especially with those in our inner circle.** One night when I was about 15, I was in a really bad mood. My hormones were doing all kinds of backflips, I was miserable and just irritated at everything and everyone. I guess I was not very nice at the dinner table, because my father, who was not always tactful, finally looked at me and said, “why are you being such a witch?” (Well, let’s say it rhymes with witch.) My parents never called us unkind names and, so I was absolutely crushed by his words. I left the table in tears and ran to my room crying; I was miserable *and* deeply hurt. My father was a very macho man, so I never expected what happened next. After a few minutes, my father came and sat down next to me and apologized for hurting my feelings. He called me his “tender-hearted baby” and held me until I stopped crying. It opened up a conversation, so that I could tell him how I was feeling and apologize to him. **I would say that through that apology and in the act of forgiveness, I had the profoundest experience in my life of the depth of my father’s love for me.**

**Confession, repentance, forgiveness sound like churchy words, but they are powerful, effective vehicles of love for imperfect people in messy relationships**. Just the thing we need when fight and we both get hurt! Amen.

1. Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas. *When Sorry Isn’t Enough: Making Things Right with Those You Love*. (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2013.) p 131-134. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Chapman & Thomas, p. 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ralph P. Martin, Interpretation: *A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)