

Pre-Introduction

Last week we started our marriage series by turning to Proverbs 4, a passage which draws our attention to the foundational issue in just about every marriage difficulty we encounter. Verse 23 in particular was telling. In this verse Solomon exhorted his son, Rehoboam with these words: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (NIV84).” The NKJV put it this way, “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.”

The point the wise old king went on to make for his son, was that it didn't matter if he knew all the principles of communication, put blinkers on to restrict his wandering eyes, and placed guardrails along the path of life to direct his steps, if his heart was out of step with God, he would never be able to talk straight, look straight or walk straight in his relationships with others, including his wife. If his desire was to honour God in the issues of life, he had to start where the issues started, the condition of his own heart.

There is no doubt that the issue we will start looking at this week is one of the most important concerns we have to deal with in our relationships – be that with a friend, family member, co-worker, spouse, or even with an enemy. Not surprisingly it is an issue of life that once again springs from the heart, as all life issues tend to do.

Introduction

At Home with Son's Killer

During the Korean War, a South Korean Christian, a civilian, was arrested by the communists and ordered shot. But when the young communist leader learned that the prisoner was in charge of an orphanage caring for small children, he decided to spare him and kill his son instead. So they shot the nineteen-year-old boy in the presence of his father.

Later the fortunes of war changed, and the young communist was captured by the United Nations forces, tried, and condemned to death. But before the sentence could be carried out, the Christian whose boy had been killed pleaded for the life of the killer. He declared that he was young, that he really did not know what he was doing. “Give him to me,” said the father, “and I’ll train him.” The UN granted the request, and that father took the murderer of his boy into his own home and cared for him. Today the young communist is a Christian pastor. —T. Roland Philips¹

What an incredible testimony of unconditional forgiveness that ultimately brought a young extremist to his knees at the cross of Christ, where he received forgiveness for his sins, and embarked on a path that would culminate in him going into vocational ministry.

Yvonne Pointer had a similar experience which stretched the limits of her readiness to forgive. Ten years after trusting Christ and emerging from a life of drug abuse, her daughter Gloria, was violently raped and then killed while on her way to school. After an understandable internal battle with what had happened, instead of becoming bitter, Yvonne threw herself into the comforting arms of her Saviour and worked tirelessly as an advocate in making the streets safe for other children. She received numerous honours for her work. She even speaks in prisons, sharing the love and forgiveness of God with the inmates. She made this important observation regarding the potentially destructive impact of harbouring unforgiveness in our hearts: “I found hatred too heavy a load to carry. Would I want the person who murdered Gloria over for Sunday dinner? No. But if I didn’t forgive him, unforgiveness would kill me too,” she says quietly. “Forgiveness releases you to live (Audrey T. Hingley, “Gloria’s Legacy,” *Today’s Christian* (May–June 2006).”

¹ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*. Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

We can learn a lot from those two parents about forgiveness. Yvonne, in particular, reminded us of the negative consequences of refusing to forgive. I'm doubtful that any of us have ever had to endure the extreme challenges to forgive that Yvonne and the South Korean dad experienced, yet we seem to struggle with hearts that are unwilling to extend forgiveness. Even trivial matters in our marriages and relationships gradually become nuclei of self-righteous indignation, anger, hatred, unforgiveness, and eventually bitterness which is slow poison to our marriages, friendships, and family relationships and robs us of joy and of life itself.

If God adopted the same policy of forgiveness towards us as we adopt towards others, we'd quickly find ourselves in a heap of trouble.

This morning I want us to turn to 3rd chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians, where we'll jump into the middle of the apostle's description of what holy living ought to look like:

Colossians 3:12–15 (NKJV)

¹² Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. ¹⁴ But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. ¹⁵ And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Prayer

- By now, most, if not all of you, should be familiar with the rule that whenever a writer uses the word "therefore," you have to ask what it's there for. On this occasion "therefore" occurs in the midst of Paul making an argument for Christ-like living instead of carnality amongst the church-goers at Colosse.

- Starting at verse 1 of chapter 3 he exhorts his listeners to “...seek those things which are above.” In verse 2 and 3 he calls for a deepening commitment to eternal things on the basis that their lives are now hidden with Christ in God, and commands them “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.” Elaborating on this he commands in verse 5 that they are put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking with in them; things like: sexual immorality (which encompasses any sexually intimate relationship outside of the marriage between a man and a woman), wildly extravagant living, depraved passions, evil desires, and covetousness. Continuing on the theme of getting rid of sinful patterns Paul subsequently tells them in verse 8 and 9 that they are to put off anger and wrath (the difference between the two being that the former refers to an explosive emotional outburst while that latter denotes anger that simmers beneath the surface). They’re also to put off malice (deliberately setting out to hurt someone), slander, and lying because none of these ought to typify the new creation they are in Christ.
- It’s after all this groundwork that Paul uses the word “therefore” in verse 12. In effect the apostle is saying, ‘In light of everything I’ve just told you about your need to have a fundamentally different perspective on life and putting off certain sinful behaviours which used to plague you before you trusted Christ...this is what I want you to do next.’
- First of all, ‘Recognise who you are!’ You are “the elect of God, holy and beloved (v. 12).” In other words, ‘You are chosen by God, the objects of His love, and set apart for Him.’ Paul’s hope was that a recognition and appreciation amongst the Colossians of their identity in Christ would affect the way they behaved.

Application

▪ Alexander's Namesake

The story is told of a soldier in the army of Alexander the Great, who was brought before the great world-conqueror for court-martial. When the emperor had listened to the charges and the evidence, he turned to the soldier facing condemnation, and said, "What is your name?" "Alexander!" was the reply. Again the emperor questioned, "What is your name?" And the second time the soldier answered, "Alexander!" With a cry of rage, the emperor roared, "I say, what is your name?" And when the soldier answered for the third time, "Alexander!" the great general angrily replied, "You say your name is Alexander? You are found guilty of your crime as charged, and now you must pay the penalty. Either change your conduct or change your name." —Unfeigned Faith²

- I can well imagine a similar conversation (cry of rage excluded) between Christ and the disobedient believer caught in the muck and mire of sin, oblivious to the name he bears. Having surveyed the evidence before Him, the Lord inquires, "What is your name?" "Christian!" comes the reply. And again Christ poses the question, "What is your name?" And for the second time the erring believer responds, "Christian!" Clearly hurt, Jesus asks for a third time, "What is your name?" And when the apathetic, rebellious believer answers yet again, "Christian," tears begin to flow from the eyes of the Saviour, as he implores His child, "Christians, change your conduct, because you cannot change your name."
- It is in light of the name we bear, the identity we have, the position we hold, "as the elect of God, holy and beloved," that Paul implores us not only to put off sinful conduct, but also to "put on" certain godly character qualities.

² Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*. Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

- Change is not just about dehabituating – getting rid of our bad habits, it’s also about rehabilitation – replacing those bad habits with good ones. Paul mentions a number of these in verse 12 all of which undergird our ability to do what he calls for in verse 13:
 - a. “tender mercies” – good modern-day equivalents would be ‘compassion,’ and ‘sensitivity.’ A heart in which tender mercy resides is a heart which doesn’t always respond in the way an offender deserves. Your husband or wife may have said something or done something offensive that fully warrants your judgment and condemnation. Yet when you’ve shaken off the disappointment and hurt, and put off the anger and wrath that naturally wells up inside you and put on tender mercies in their place you respond in a way that is consistent with the name you bear. That doesn’t mean that there are no consequences at all for the offender, but it does mean that you have responded in a God-honouring fashion.
 - b. “kindness” – This is a character quality that is extremely subtle. It can also be translated ‘selfless,’ ‘considerate,’ or ‘thoughtful.’ Kindness is that quality that causes you to empty out the dishwasher, put your dirty clothes in the wash-basket, and open the door for your wife. It’s the characteristic that compels you to bring coffee to your husband in bed, make him his favourite meal, or just sit down and listen to him when he’s had a hard day at work. This all sounds like common-sense, something we should do naturally. It used to go by the name ‘chivalry,’ and thrived in an age of gentlemen and ladies, but in this day and age, and in this dog-eat-dog world, the heart of kindness has sadly been ripped out and replaced by selfishness, self-assertiveness, and self-esteem...

...all buttressed by a rabid, warped perspective on femininity and masculinity, that is only ever concerned about one thing, 'me.'

Paul reminded the church at Rome of the importance of kindness when he said this:

Romans 12:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another;

How unlike the world we live in, but how like the one who goes by the name of 'Christian.'

- c. "humility" –: A deep sense of one's moral littleness; lowliness of mind. In a nutshell, humility is to think of yourself and see yourself as God sees you. A warped perception of your worth may manifest itself in brash arrogance or pitiful self-loathing, two assessments which seem worlds apart, but really aren't all that different. Neither conclusion manifests humility, because both of them are out of whack with God's view of you. I am convinced that a marriage devoid of humility is doomed to failure because humility is that crucial ingredient that allows us to confess that we have sinned against our spouse and desire their forgiveness. It's that quality that enables us to admit, 'I was wrong and to take responsibility for our words and actions.'

In a passage which is crowned with the ultimate demonstration of humility, the glorified Christ taking on human flesh, Paul exhorted the believers in the church at Philippi:

Philippians 2:3–4 (NKJV)

³ Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

⁴ *Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

- d. “Meekness” – is a word which is both misunderstood and maligned today. Juggling just two letters of this characteristic brings us to a word that aptly describes what most people think of meekness – that it indicates weakness. But nothing could be further from the truth. Meekness actually communicates incredible strength. It is first and foremost exercised towards God. It is that spirit in which we accept God’s dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting, humbly submit to the fact that our heavenly Father knows best. But while it is chiefly exercised towards God, it undoubtedly impacts our relationships with others, including our relationships with our husbands and wives, even when they are mean-spirited, demeaning, ungracious, and uncaring towards us. Under such adverse and provocative circumstances, meekness is what allows us to respond instead of react; to endure injury and insult with patience and without resentment. Jesus gave a great description of meekness in the Sermon on the Mount when He instructed the crowd:

Matthew 5:43–44 (NKJV)

⁴³ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you*

Far from being weak, meek men and women are supermen and superwomen in the heat of marital conflict.

e. “longsuffering” - Is from the Greek word μακροθυμια. It literally means, ‘long burning.’ Given the right circumstances, there are certain things in marriage that may light your fuse and eventually lead to an emotional explosion with significant collateral damage. It may be a careless word or a thoughtless action, but whatever it is, it’s enough to bring the flame down on the fuse and set a dangerous process in motion. It goes without saying that the longer the fuse is, the longer it is able to burn before it reaches the explosives, and the greater the opportunity is to halt the progress of the flame. A person with a long fuse, a husband or wife who is longsuffering, is someone who is slow in retaliating or avenging a wrong and often times allows themselves enough space and time to take a deep breath, think carefully about the offense, and respond in a reconciliatory, God-glorifying way.

- While all of the characteristics we have just examined are of undoubted value in their own right, collectively they make an inestimable contribution to being able to do what Paul calls for in verse 13:

Colossians 3:13 (NKJV)

¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.

- Tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, and long-suffering are the nuts and bolts of Christian character that allow us to bear with one another and importantly also to forgive one another.

f. “bearing with one another, and forgiving one another” – One Bible teacher paraphrased this verse, ‘Not taking offense and not holding onto offense. “Bearing with one another” simply means that we make allowance for one another’s faults and weaknesses.

It comes as a shock to some women when they discover that the man they married is not the man they dated. They once thought he was perfect, but now realise he is anything but perfect. Men can have the same rude awakening to the once hidden imperfections of their wives. But rather than bailing when the imperfections surface a husband and wife that bear with one another, begin by understanding and acknowledging that every individual has flaws but as a couple they can work on their weaknesses with tender mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, and longsuffering.

It's taken us a while to get to the all-important phrase "forgiving one another." We've highlighted and examined a number of Christian characteristics, but this is where the rubber of those traits meets the road, "forgiving one another." In his book, *What did you expect*, author Paul Tripp makes this observation regarding forgiveness, "I cannot think of a more essential ingredient in marriage than forgiveness. Yet forgiveness is not always attractive. Forgiveness is difficult and costly. It will push you to the borders of your faith. It will tempt you to fear and doubt. But when forgiveness is granted and debts are cancelled, the return is much greater than the cost."

- Next week we'll return to this same passage in Colossians 3 to answer four important questions about forgiveness:
 1. What exactly is forgiveness?
 2. What do we need to be willing to forgive?
 3. Why don't people forgive?
 4. What are the consequences of unforgiveness?

We'll also reflect briefly on what Paul refers to as "the bond of perfection" and consider the importance of God's peace and an attitude of thankfulness in our marriages.

Prayer