

Forgiveness

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Well, a pleasant good morning to you all, to all of us in the Central and Eastern time zones and for any brave people, early risers, coffee drinkers, who might possibly be up in a different time zone, who are tuned in this morning. It's a decent day here in Minneapolis. And it is the last Day of Unleavened Bread.

The Passover is not far behind of us at this point. Its beginning is the first step in God's plan of salvation. It's always a very sober reminder to us, for each one of us, every Passover. It's also very exhilarating, isn't it, very exhilarating time, because we reflect on what Jesus Christ did for us. We reflect on why He did what He did. It makes it very personal. It makes it very, very personal to us, each at a very deep level.

Penalty had to be paid for our sins so that we could be forgiven of what was in the past. In Isaiah (and we all understand this) Isaiah said that our sins have separated us from God. And that's the state that we were in – separated from God. It wrecked the potential relationship that we had with our Father. And our sins hid us from His face. So, in short, we were doomed. We were in a very desperate state of being, unable to have a right relationship with God except that He did something miraculous for us, which is to divinely intervene, which He did.

So we reflect on that at Passover time. It's very sobering and it's very deeply appreciated by us.

Let's turn to Matthew chapter 26. God divinely intervened through His Son. We'll reflect on this just a little bit. Matthew 26 and beginning in verse 26:

Matthew 26:26 *And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body."*

Verse 27 *Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you."*

Verse 28 *For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*

Christ is here explaining the symbolism of why that Body was broken, why the blood was shed and of course, the fact that we could have this new-covenant relationship with the Father because of the sacrifice of His Son. It established that new-covenant relationship so that we could be reconciled.

And through that blood the forgiveness of sin came. It's very significant for us, isn't it? We couldn't do anything on our own to pay that penalty. Jesus Christ had to do it for us. That was the only means by which we could be reconciled. And that's a very humbling thing.

What we see from this is that forgiveness is huge! Forgiveness is a huge thing. Without it there could be no extended family of God. There would be nothing except for God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Romans chapter 5, let's go there. We'll begin here in verse 6. Forgiveness is a quality of God's mind. It's a priceless quality of His mind. It's how He thinks, it's how He lives, it's how He operates.

Romans 5:6 *For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.*

Verse 7 *For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die.*

Verse 8 *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

As we see here in verse 8, forgiveness is an expression of God's love to us. Love is the end product and forgiveness is a part of that expression of love. That willingness to forgive far preceded our birth, preceded anything known about us. In other words, forgiveness is a part of God's mind from the beginning. It's a part of who He is. His plan of salvation could not go forward without His love being expressed in this way, in forgiveness. Without it there is no hope for mankind. With it, obviously, it's a totally different world, tremendous potential.

We need to let that soak in. His forgiveness covers more than our past sins. There's obviously a need.

It covers every sin ahead of us yet. John spoke of that. We do still sin, but anything that we repent of will be forgiven. That's the quality of God's mind. To be forgiven is to be totally and completely pardoned. This is an incredible wonderful aspect about our Father. It's a wonderful and amazing thing that He offers to us.

Go to Psalm 103. It's a very uplifting Psalm, a good one to read from time to time just to remind ourselves. Psalm 103, let's begin in verse 1:

Psalm 103:1 *A Psalm Of David. Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name!*

In other words, He's saying, "With every fiber of my being. Let's bless His name."

Verse 2 *Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits:*

David lists many benefits here in this chapter, but let's take note of those that relate to our subject at hand today, which is forgiveness. And if you want a title and don't already have it, the title is Forgiveness.

This particular sermon ties closely together with the sermon I gave on the Sabbath titled Righteous Judgment. We're going to revisit some of the same scriptures because these things go hand in hand. Verse 3:

Verse 3 *Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases,*

It's **all** of our sins. It's not the ones we wished we could even forget about ourselves. It's **all** of them. And it says that He "Heals all our diseases". Of course, we're interested in physical healing, absolutely, each one of us are. We should be. But think, brethren, of the spiritual diseases that have already been healed in our minds and those that will be healed in the time ahead of us.

Verse 4 *Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with loving-kindness and tender mercies,*

And so, we're redeemed, we're bought back from the death penalty, and instead of the penalty hanging over our head, He puts something else on it. He puts on our heads loving kindness and tender mercies. He crowns us with that. That's a pretty good exchange for the death penalty being over it. All of this is totally unmerited treatment, totally unmerited that we're given.

Drop down to verse 8:

Verse 8 *The LORD is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.*

Verse 10 *He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities.*

Verse 11 *For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;*

Verse 12 *As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

This isn't the picture that a lot of Christianity paints today, or a lot of people without understanding, I should say. They don't understand. He's portrayed as hard, the God of the Old Testament – the Father – in their view. He's painted as a hard and unforgiving God. And, in fact, our Father is uncompromising with the Godly standard. But He is forgiving beyond our wildest ability to comprehend. But it's a great thing to think about because that's what we're to become!

You think about how high the heavens are above the earth. This changes continually because we're constantly able to see farther and farther into space with the technology we have today. It's at least 15 billion light years from the earth to the farthest galaxy that we can see where we're getting reflection of

light now. That's how far it is. For us, 15 billion light years is inconceivable. Light travels at the speed of 186,300 miles per second. That's an incredible amount of speed, isn't it? That means that light travels 5.8 trillion miles in one year! It's hard for us to fathom that.

But think about the sun, for instance. That's a mere 93,000,000 miles from Earth! It's nothing in comparison to the expansiveness of the universe. It's like being in the same parking lot – our sun is nothing by comparison. What this says is, God's mercy is complete. East and west don't meet. It's impossible for us to grasp, humanly.

But this defines our Father's mind! That He's that merciful, that He's that forgiving. This is how completely He forgives us. Isaiah said something comparable to this in chapter 1, verse 18. He said:

“Come now, and let us reason together. Says the Lord, though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

So, on the one hand, David speaks about how far God removes our sins from us, which is again unimaginable and here God leaves no doubt that when a sin is forgiven, we're not tainted in God's eyes. In human eyes we're often left tainted, but not in God's eyes. We're not pink instead of crimson; we're as white as fresh fallen snow. And those of us in Minnesota can relate to that about 9 months out of the year. But what I'm saying is, there's no lingering legacy with God. When He wipes it clean, it's clean immediately.

Verse 13: *As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him.*

We do pity our children. You know, when they're repentant, we can't wait to forgive. That's how our Father is, to the tenth power. It's through this forgiveness that we can and do enter into this new-covenant relationship with God. It's a Father-to-son relationship where His characteristics, just like our physical characteristics are passed on to our children; His spiritual characteristics can be written in our hearts and in our minds, which is really redundant. It's in our minds. He writes them through His Spirit.

And that's, brethren, how our spiritual diseases can be healed – diseases like arrogance, diseases like envy or self centeredness, self righteousness. These things prohibit reconciliation.

So brethren, we have to become like our Father – totally forgiving.

During this time of year we focus on God's limitless desire to forgive us of every transgression. And I know I speak for all of us, it fills us with hope. The spring Holy Days are sobering, they are, but they fill us with hope and a sense of security because we know what our Father is like. We know that we can count on His to forgive us when we go to Him and confess our sins.

And so at Passover we genuinely recommit ourselves to becoming just like Him and like our elder brother, Jesus Christ. Passover is very typical of our baptism. And, of course, baptism is, for us, the single greatest step that we'll ever take in life. Marriage is a huge step. Having children is a tremendous thing, getting a degree so we can get the job that we want, that's a tremendous thing. But those things are virtually insignificant in comparison to baptism because that is where our relationship with our Father really begins. I'm referring to the spirit-born relationship. For those who are not yet baptized, you have a relationship. It's just not as close; it's not as intense as it will be when you have the Spirit within you.

Let's go to Acts chapter 2. The forgiveness that God extends to us comes a particular way. Verse 36:

Acts 2:36 *“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*

Verse 37 *Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”*

Verse 38 *Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus*

Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 39 *For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."*

Prior to baptism, we begin to repent. And that requires two things – first that we recognize and acknowledge our sin, and then we have to turn and go the other way. We have to go in the direction of the One who is forgiving us. We go toward God. What we know about God is that He's defined by one word, and that is love. And love is expressed, one of its expressions is in the desire to forgive others.

Christ said, "*Father forgive them*, (just before He was crucified He said) "*forgive them. They don't know what it is they are doing.*" He was completely willing to forgive in the face of death.

When those individuals who were crucifying Him literally, are resurrected they will have their chance to repent and be baptized in the second resurrection.

Whether they choose it then and are forgiven doesn't take away from the fact that it's God's fervent desire for them to be forgiven, each one of us.

Let's turn to 2 Peter chapter 3 and verse 9. Here we see clear evidence of this in this statement made by Peter.

2 Peter 3:9 *The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, (He's very patient) not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.*

God's whole way of thinking, His entire projection of His mind is geared toward every single person who's ever lived to come to repentance, whether it's the one who thrust a spear into Christ or whether it's you or me; it makes no difference. We're all the same. Each one of us are dead without forgiveness. As I said earlier, there wouldn't be a plan of salvation without it.

That's why it's so vitally important for us, brethren, to examine ourselves when it comes to having a whole-hearted attitude to forgive others.

Let's go to Matthew chapter 5 beginning in verse 43. This spiritual quality that Christ is going to bring out here is unique to God's sons.

Matthew 5:43 *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*

We don't necessarily have to hear that said. We know that's how life operates on the physical level.

Verse 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,*

And why?

Verse 45 *that you may be sons of your Father in heaven;.....*

If we're going to be sons of our Father, spiritually in His image, we have to be able to forgive those who hate us, those who spitefully use us, those who persecute us. It's impossible, brethren, to do these things without a whole-hearted attitude of forgiveness toward others. It's impossible without the Holy Spirit. It's also impossible without God first forgiving us. Of course, these things have happened. We've been given the Holy Spirit at baptism. We have been forgiven. What does it produce? It reminds us again of what the Apostle John said, "*We love because He first loved us,*"

It's one of the greatest principles in all of God's word. Love is taking the first step and I know, brethren, I talk about this often and I always will, probably, because it is so basic and so vital to our understanding. Love takes the first step. It's not identified by how others treat us. That doesn't have anything to do with it. Love is identified by how we treat others because it is out-going. It's not in-coming.

Make no mistake, that person who loves his enemies, does good to those who hate him and prays for those who mistreat him are going to stand out in a crowd. Christ said we would, didn't He? He said that we'd be known by our love for one another.

A genuine willingness to forgive, whether the other party is repentant or not, exists because of the hope of a reconciled relationship. In other words, we don't offer forgiveness to get something in return. We offer it because it's God's mind, because there's the hope of something better, a reconciled relationship.

Instead of seeing an enemy only, what does God see? Somebody who hates His Son's name? He sees a potential son and that's what makes the willingness to forgive come to life for our Father.

Christ said it was his Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. We've already talked about it. It doesn't even start until we're forgiven, does it?

Love expressed in forgiveness is the first step in that particular process. God's mind is light years from the natural human mind. Verse 45:

Verse 45 *that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*

Verse 46 *For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*

Verse 47 *And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?*

The kind of love that Christ is referring to here is self love.

If we're only conciliatory to those who think like us or who share a similar interest or whatever the case may be, how would we be considered God's sons? God holds this forgiveness out there for everybody.

So, in conclusion here, He says in verse 48:

Verse 48 *Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.*

That's God's expectation of each one of us. It's impossible, as we well know, without the Holy Spirit. But we have the Holy Spirit.

It's possible for us, brethren, to someday become perfect.

So, today, we need to ask ourselves, to think about this. Do we have that same whole-hearted desire, you know, the attitude to forgive others?

Today we have very, very small congregations. It's very difficult to avoid someone that we may not be totally on the same page with, so to speak. It's probably a great blessing, I would say it is a great blessing to have small groups like this of us who meet together because it puts the prod on us, doesn't it?

I can remember growing up in the Church and we'd have, well, we all remember it, we might have 200 or up to 500 in a congregation. You could avoid somebody every single Sabbath day if you wanted to. You wouldn't even have to speak to them any time unless, by chance, you had to wash their feet on Passover. You could avoid people. Today we can't, so it puts the prod on us and it's a good thing.

Sometimes it is difficult for us, though, isn't it? Sometimes it's very difficult.

As we prepare to go farther into this subject I'd like to relate to you a story and maybe an account is a better way to say it, because a lot of times we think stories are made up. This is a true account. And it may seem an unlikely one, given the characters that are in this particular account.

The characters happened to be, one of them was my dog named Dingo. I got Dingo when he was a little pup, probably a month and a half old. He was a, I guess you'd have to call him a mutt. He looked like he was probably half Australian Shepherd and perhaps half Labrador or something like that. I got him when I was 17 or 18 years of age.

We used to meet in an AFL-CIO building in Rapid City where I grew up. And one day (The doors were always open in the summer because of the heat. We'd have fans set up to kind of circulate the air.) One day I just caught a little glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye and there was a little dog over there at the doorway. I thought, wow, that is a nice looking little dog. And then I went back to taking my notes and just spaced it out. Pretty soon, first thing I know this little dog is walking right up my aisle and he walks over and lays his head right on my foot and goes to sleep, just like that, like he found his home. And of course, nobody came to claim him afterward. I looked around all over in the parking lot and nobody there. And so he became my dog. I've often believed, literally, that he was a gift from God.

But anyway in his first year of life, (we lived on a farm and there are many, many difficulties and dangers for dogs, especially pups growing up), and I think it was the second month I had him, we were out in the farm yard, out in the corral and we had some cattle out there. And there was a cow that didn't like the looks of Dingo because he was a dog. And so she came right across the corral and drilled him with her head and broke his hip. So to make a long story short, I had to take care of him for awhile. I built a little straw house for him and would bring him water and food and whenever I wasn't working, I'd visit him a little bit and comfort him and that sort of thing.

And so we spent a lot of time together and he really bonded with me because of that. I had to do other things with him in that first year. After he recovered he took a liking to killing unclean animals such as pigs, the neighbor's pigs. And so I had to correct him for that. After he was corrected one time he quit killing pigs.

I had to pull porcupine quills out of him because he would get into porcupines. They would come into the yard at night. On the farm, dogs are called watch dogs and that's what he was. He would watch for things during the night. And if a porcupine came in, or a skunk, or whatever the case, you would always know it.

The point here, we were close, this dog and I. Now, when he was about a year and a half old he was put to the test. This is where we're going.

I had just bought about 100 head of ewes, (the first bunch of sheep that I'd ever owned) and I had them outside in a holding pen. So I took Dingo out there with me to introduce him to the sheep, because, by this time he was a big, strong dog. I took him up to the edge of the corral and I pointed to the sheep in there and he was looking at them with interest and I just laid the law down to him. I said, "Those sheep you will not touch." And he was looking at me and I knew his looks and he was saying in his eyes, "Okay, I got it." And so, I stepped on into the corral and I told him to come with me and there we went. I went over to turn the stock tank on so Dingo had set down and he was just looking at the sheep. And I glanced over to see what the sheep were doing and there was a ewe, just like the cow before her that did not like the looks of this dog. And so, sure enough, she put her head down and came on the run. And I said to him, instantly I said, "You sit." And he sat. And he watched her come full force and smack into him in his shoulder. It sent him sprawling. He never even got up out of the dirt. He just laid there. And, of course, the ewe wandered off, because he wasn't even going to fight.

Now you might think that a dog would have bad feelings toward a sheep after something like that. And the answer is no, he didn't. He did not! As the days went by I could tell by the look in his eye. And again, if you grow up on a farm you get used to animals. You get used to understanding how they think and what's going on. I could tell by looking at this dog, the look in his eye, his body language. He would sit in the sheep corral and he would smile at the sheep.

Dingo and that ewe became the best of friends. And I could remember many, many times seeing him enter the corral and she'd come up to him and they'd touch noses. And sometimes I would see them at the stock tank drinking water together.

The point of it is here, that he had forgiven her completely. He had taken abuse that he didn't have coming and he had forgiven her completely. They had reconciled and they became the best of friends. I can remember thinking from time to time that the dog was more converted than I was. And of course, I say that tongue in cheek, I say that jokingly because the sheep and the dog were just simple animals. Without the human spirit, without the image that God made us in His own image. But all of that, to me, makes this lesson even more poignant, doesn't it?

Why was he able to do something that is very difficult for those who are made in God's image and with the Holy Spirit? WHY was he able to do it?

What I can tell you, brethren, is, from having known this animal is that he wasn't filled with his own will. He had a singular desire generally. His desire was to please the one who had given him everything. You know, the person who'd been taking care of him and helping him. His pleasure in this example didn't hinge on his own selfish ego. His pleasure was to please me and what happened? He was blessed in return with a corral full of good relationships with this flock of sheep.

Let's turn to Matthew chapter 18. It's not always that easy, necessarily, for we humans. The disciples in this account don't yet have the Holy Spirit yet but we can easily relate because we still deal with some of these things today. Verse 1:

Matthew 18:1 *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*

And of course, here we see the human problem. Sometimes we get filled with our own will and we want to have preeminence. We get proud.

Verse 2 *Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them,*

Verse 3 *and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Verse 4 *Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

Christ used a more, perhaps, appropriate example than I did with my dog Dingo. He used a human child. Of course, with children there is a particular stage, and it's very early in their lives, a very particular stage where that child is very, very teachable; very, very malleable where he or she can be very, very easily corrected. And they want to become just like mom and dad.

We can remember our own children, perhaps, going through that particular stage. It is a humble frame of mind.

Brethren, for us to become great like God, capable of loving and forgiving as He does, requires humility. It's necessary for reconciliation.

What Christ has said here is setting the tone for the rest of the chapter. Each section is about how we get along with each other.

In each case a humble or a childlike mind is the necessary ingredient for success.

Let's drop down to verse 15:

Verse 15 *"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.*

This is a verse that can be totally misused if we have the wrong approach, if we have the wrong attitude. I can remember in times past where perhaps some, not many, would get really, really bug eyed over this particular verse and they'd be ready for war against their brother – ready to fight that self-righteous war.

And when we do that, my old dog, as unconverted as he was, just might have the edge on us.

Christ said what he did at the beginning of the chapter as a prelude to these sections.

He said unless we become humble minded like a teachable little child we won't make it into the kingdom. And so when we go to our brother like a little child, and how do little children do it, the type that I'm talking about? They're kind, they listen, and they're gentle with a wholehearted attitude to forgive. That's the type of attitude that we have to go to our brother in.

The likelihood of him hearing us when we approach an individual, a brother or sister in Christ, the chances of them listening when we approach them in that way goes up exponentially.

I know it worked in a particular case with me. I had a brother come to me alone (I had it happen several different times through the years) but in this particular case, I remember it because the man did it so well. He came totally in a humble frame of mind, very, very kindly. I don't even know where he is today but I remember his name and I remember clearly the conversation we had. He came to me and told me something that I needed to hear.

It took me several days and right at first my attitude was, "This guy's off the chart." I had a self-righteous attitude. It took several days for my attitude to line up, for me to get the pride out of the way. But he had planted a seed and it did take root.

It takes only one humble-minded person to properly initiate the process and if there are two in the mix - there's going to be reconciliation, which is a wonderful thing – two people drinking from the same water and that is the living water.

Christ would never have addressed this particular issue which He did in Matthew 18 if it wasn't a recipe for success for at least one. What if somebody doesn't reconcile? What if they don't listen? The fact that you did it, that you went and tried to do it properly is success for one, absolutely.

And if you want to know one of the best indicators of a heart fully willing to forgive it's that person who actually goes to his brother and goes alone and he goes with that humble, childlike attitude. That's one of the best indicators there is of somebody willing to forgive.

It's really, when we think about it, it's pretty amazing how pride can stop someone from communicating with their brother about an issue that needs to be brought up - and some issues don't need to be brought up. Sound judgment has to come into these cases.

Let's go to Proverbs chapter 17 verse 9. Solomon puts this beautifully.

Proverbs 17:9 *He who covers a transgression seeks love,*

There are a couple of ways that we can cover a transgression. If the transgression is against us, we might consider to keep it to our self for a period of time, to give the other party some space to grow in. God gives us space. He's patient with us as He waits.

Often that's all it takes, is to give someone space and the other party will self-correct. You know, when we have an instance like that, we can pray for our brother or sister and we can ask for God's blessing to be upon them. If we ask that for virtually anybody God can give them what they need most. So we need to pray that way, that God would give them what they need most. And often, as I said, that's all it takes to self-correct.

The other way to cover it is to talk to that person alone. If the situation is such that it does not appear as though giving it some space is going to take care of it then the remedy is to go to that person alone and to keep it covered.

I read a book (not recently but some time ago) on the subject of forgiveness just looking for ideas and scripture and so on and I found that this particular book had some accuracy scripturally and actually a fair amount of it. Then the author did something to destroy it.

He suggested that in regard to Matthew 18 verse 5 a person should, if they had to, just find one other person to unload on, some close friend to unload on. You know, I can imagine there are a lot of people (I just got it at a Christian bookstore) probably a lot of people read that and said to themselves, "Yeah, that's just what I'll do. That's what I need to do, just unload on one." That isn't the attitude of a little child. The attitude of a little child is to believe God and do it the right way.

Let's look at the last part of verse 9.

Proverbs 17:9..... *But he who repeats a matter (Talks to others) separates friends.*

That causes disunity and that's one of the things that God says He hates. He hates disunity. And that's why Christ said what He did.

Let's go to chapter 11 here, while we're in Proverbs. We'll look at another interesting verse:

Proverbs 11:17 *The merciful man does good for his own soul, (in other words, for his own physical well being) But he who is cruel troubles his own flesh.*

In the process of seeking love, a forgiving person, their attitude is therapeutic for them, physically speaking. The interesting this is that science has actually proven this – one of the things where they've reinvented the wheel. They got it circular like it was supposed to be. They've actually been able to prove this, that when you forgive, it actually can make us healthy. It lifts stress and of course, we know this. When we have forgiven others we do feel better. It takes a load off of us. It's one of the side effects of doing it God's way.

Then on the other hand, the unforgiving can make themselves sick. And again, this is true according to science. God said it first but it has been rediscovered. Physically, we can make ourselves sick by not forgiving.

Let's go to Ephesians chapter 4 (and of course, what we're talking about is making ourselves spiritually sick.) Beginning in verse 30 Paul says:

Ephesians 4:30 *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

We can stifle it or we can actually eventually quench it, depending on where we're at.

Verse 31 *Let all bitterness (this, of course is one of the main things that will make us sick) Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.*

If we want to put a face on what an unforgiving attitude looks like, this is it. It's not a pretty face, is it?

Bitterness can manifest itself in many ways. We can be short-fused, irritable, easily excited. We can have high blood pressure. Many things can cause high blood pressure, we understand that, but so can this, bitterness. We can have sleeplessness, we can become depressed, we can feel isolated, we can feel unhappy when we allow bitterness. We could add to this list resentment, we could feel resentment, we could be holding a grudge. We could be replaying something over and over and over in our minds of what this person did to offend us. It might have been decades ago. We can have this desire to want to get even, or even actually to want revenge. Now that's a disease. It is a disease, spiritually speaking. And the remedy for it is verse 32.

Verse 32 *And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.*

Letting the Holy Spirit work within us. Allowing the mind of Christ to be in us. That is the antidote to bitterness. And it is an open invitation to the Holy Spirit. Whereas bitterness and those other things can restrict it, restrict it, restrict it, the farther we go with it. These things - kindness, tenderness, forgiving – it's an open invitation, the door comes wide open to the Holy Spirit.

You know, when you read this particular verse it almost makes our body want to relax, doesn't it? It does mine. I'm sure it does yours, too.

Doing all of these things or doing these things, rather, brethren, to all people (not everyone but – but doing them to all) fills us with love and that love will flow out from us. That's the approach Christ is referring to in Matthew 18.

Let's go to Galatians chapter 6. What Paul says here is also typical of it. He says in verse 1 of Galatians 6:

Galatians 6:1 *Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual (emphasis on spiritual) restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.*

Verse 2 *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

There is spiritual, those who are using and allowing the Holy Spirit are to restore a stumbling brother or sister. We can do that with encouragement, we can do that with listening, advising them to overcome. And when it's applicable, we do it with forgiveness. If somebody needs to be forgiven, we forgive them. And we help them to work toward reconciliation.

But now let's take a look at verse 3 here and consider the implications of this.

Verse 3 *For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*

Again here we get back to pride (Thinking ourselves to be something). Pride can take on more than one face, brethren, and it can rob us of so much!

If we're too proud to forgive someone or to accept correction, to listen to someone, it can't leave us with a very unsettled feeling inside, which of course, it should. It can leave us actually with a lingering fear in the back of our minds because we know something's not right and we haven't done something about it.

Equal to that, also, is not forgiving ourselves when God already has. That's something we need to think about, too. It's not a common thing, I don't think, but it is something that can happen. Satan has a lot of

methods, doesn't he? - One for every circumstance. But not forgiving ourselves is a very subtle way of what, competing with Christ's sacrifice.

Let's go to 2 Corinthians 5 and verse 17. Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*

We can't become something new by atoning for ourselves. If we think that there's something we can do on our own, it's impossible. Only through Christ, has the price been paid for us. We have to accept it. We have to humbly accept that no matter how much we may loathe our past.

Fear is one of the main reasons we may not forgive ourselves when God already has. It's an opposite form of arrogance.

Turn to 1 John. Maybe this will help explain what I'm talking about here – 1 John chapter 4 and verse 17.

1 John 4:17 *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.*

The humility to realize we can't earn forgiveness ourselves gives us boldness, rather than fear, in the Day of Judgment because we have to trust our Father, don't we? We can't earn it (nothing we can do) so we just put our trust in Him completely. Then he says in verse 18:

Verse 18 *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.*

Perfect love comes through God's forgiveness, so we have to accept it. Torment and fear is removed by taking on the attitude of a little child. And we know how our children are and how they were when they were little.

When a child has really, truly loving parents they believe it when their parents forgive them, and that's how we must be with our Father. Then in verse 19 we get back to that foundational principle.

Verse 19 *We love Him because He first loved us.*

And of course, it should really read, "We love because He first loved us. Perfect love, brethren, is encouraged among ourselves as God's people by having that attitude to forgive and also to listen. That is what encourages it to go out, to continue on. Fear is cast out by love.

Let's go back to Matthew chapter 18 now; we'll pick it up in verse 16. He continues here:

Matthew 18:16 *But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'*

If the sinning brother isn't willing to listen, you take one or two others – we look for people with child-like attitudes, we look for humble individuals to go along as witnesses to establish the facts. Verse 17:

Verse 17 *And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.*

So, what Christ is saying is, there comes an end to this process, obviously. But the whole process is about working toward reconciliation in love. It's about restoring love.

All of us, as God's people, have to be forgiven from time to time and we all have to forgive others from time to time.

Let's go to chapter 6 here, we'll pick it up in verse 12. This is a fact that Christ makes double clear to us. We are going to have to forgive others. Verse 12 and this is in His model prayer Christ said:

Matthew 6:12 *And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.*

This is a basic framework, a basic part of our daily prayer. The principle involved here – forgiving us of our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Christ concluded the prayer and immediately expanded on it in verse 14.

Matthew 6:14 *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

Here He has barely concluded this model prayer and He is reiterating the same point over again. And the reason is, because He knows how human nature is. He knows that Satan is going to continually bombard us with the attitude of not forgiving, becoming bitter or resentful.

We don't need to turn to Romans chapter 7. We know Romans 7 fairly well, verse 15, Paul said something that fits each of us to a tee. He said:

Romans 7:15 *For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.*

That's why Christ made it double clear back in Matthew, that we've got to forgive. We must forgive. Sometimes it's very, very difficult. It's not the first thing that comes to our natural minds. As a matter of fact, and I think that we've all probably experienced it, sometimes we'd rather accept the knot in our stomach, we'd rather accept the fact that we might be stifling the Holy Spirit and to live with that lingering fear, than to actually forgive. Sometimes, perhaps, we've all experienced that, even though we've been given the power and the understanding to overcome this thing.

Let's go to Isaiah 58 and in verse 2. Here we find the solution, brethren, is to humble ourselves before God and repent of an unforgiving attitude regardless of the wrongs.

Isaiah 58:2 *Yet they seek Me daily, And delight to know My ways, As a nation that did righteousness, And did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask of Me the ordinances of justice; They take delight in approaching God.*

Verse 3 *'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?' "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your laborers.*

Now we all know, that one of the main purposes of fasting is to humble ourselves, if we actually do it that way. But what God is saying here to Israel is that you fast and act like you enjoy coming before Me. You many the right pretenses and yet you realize that your fast is not doing you any good. There is no change coming from it.

Verse 4 *Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day, To make your voice heard on high.*

He says you can't come to Me this way. If you want help, if you want resolution in your difficulties, don't come to Me in this way.

This is a fast about changing someone else, and this again goes back to that prideful kind of a fast. It's a selfish thing. Verse 6:

Verse 6 *“Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?”*

That’s what God’s looking for, brethren, when we go to Him. It’s not about nailing somebody else, going to God, trying to force God to get vengeance for us because of something that somebody else has done.

It’s about loosing bonds, undoing heavy burdens.

In the context of what we’re talking about today it’s about working toward reconciliation, having the courage and the humility to go to our brother or sister, rather than to accuse them before our Father, which is not pleasing to Him at all. It’s also about being willing to listen when somebody comes to us. Sometimes we need to fast and ask God to help us to be of that frame of mind so that we can hear and we can receive.

Let’s look at the last half of verse 9.

Verse 9 *....“If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,*

The proper fast is not about the other guy, it’s not about pointing the finger. It’s not about speaking about others. It’s not about keeping things bottled up inside until we get bitter or until we become fearful.

We’ve got to repent of these things and ask God to lift these burdens (those are the burdens) lift these burdens from us to give us an attitude of complete forgiveness. God wants us to learn to think like Him, but it requires a humble mind. Let’s go to verse 8 and then we’ll look at the first half of verse 9.

Verse 8 *Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

Verse 9 *Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’*

He’ll be listening, ready to help. This is spiritual healing. This is where spiritual healing comes from. The pride, the bitterness, the fear can be replaced by God’s way of thinking, which is outgoing love and forgiveness. And, brethren, then we will be close to God and there is no better feeling than to know that you are close to God.

2 Corinthians 1, let’s go to 2 Corinthians 1 and in verse 3. Like any father, God expects us to follow His lead as His children. Paul says here in verses 3 and 4:

2 Corinthians 1:3 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,*

Verse 4 *who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

There is probably nothing more comforting than to know that you’ve been forgiven. When somebody says, “I forgive you” and you know they mean it, what a comfort or to forgive, it’s a comfort. Whether God has forgiven us or some other person or we have forgiven some other person, it’s a great comfort.

In the context of what we’re talking about today, God gives us this comfort, brethren, so that we can be like Him, so that we can turn around and give it to others.

The point is, forgiveness begets forgiveness. It generates the same thing. It takes the first step just as the One who loves.

Let’s go to Lamentations chapter 3. We see another tremendous aspect about God’s forgiveness which He wants us to have, beginning in verse 22, verses 22 through 24.

Lamentations 3:22 *Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not.*

Verse 23 *They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.*

Verse 24 *"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!"*

And so, we're not consumed - God's forgiveness, that's why we're not consumed. Instead we're revitalized, we're recharged, we're encouraged. The yokes and the burdens are lifted every single day, brethren, that we ask to forgive us for something, those burdens are lifted. Those things are wiped clean. And why is that? Because He is faithful. He is utterly faithful to forgive.

Brethren, we need to fill each other with the same hope that God gives us by means of our faithfulness to forgive, so that our brothers and sisters in Christ, or our neighbors, or whomever, can know they're dealing with a person who is a forgiving person every time.

We want to make others thrive, because when we do brethren, it's going to beget more of the same. Forgiveness is just an expression of love. Love begets love, forgiveness flows out from us and it goes among us. It just continues, doesn't it? We don't want to hinder it.

Let's conclude in Micah chapter 6 and we'll read verses 6 through 8.

Micah 6: *With what shall I come before the LORD, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old?*

Verse 7 *Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

Verse 8 *He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?*

That's what God wants, brethren. The sacrifices and offerings that have been offered for a long time didn't produce any sort of spiritual change. They never did, they never can.

They don't give us the power to be molded and shaped into a member of God's family. Our Father is interested in what we can become through the sacrifice of His Son. That's what He's interested in.

He wants us to do justly. What does that mean? He wants us to be able to come to righteous conclusions, to righteous judgments, because those things always point in the direction of life.

He wants us to love and that's interesting, to love, to have a passion for forgiving, which is the only way that His Family can grow. And that's why Jesus Christ gave Himself as He did. And He wants us to walk humbly, which is another way to say something else. It's just another way to say He wants us to walk in faith. Faith and humility are two different sides of the same coin.

Judgment, mercy and faith is what He desires, brethren. These are the weightier matters of the law. That's what Christ told us. The purpose of each of these is to give life to all who will choose it. It's all outgoing.

So brethren, let's make forgiveness and the willingness and the intensity and the desire to give it completely and faithfully our aim in the year ahead and delight in the spiritual healing that can flow from it.