

**Whatever Happens, Walk Worthy**  
**Opening of School Convention**  
**September 4, 1998, 10:20 a.m.**  
**Whatever Happens...Forgive the Unforgiving**  
**Ephesians 4:1, 32-5:2**

Introduction

- One of the greatest insights from scripture I have gained in the past twenty years has to do with forgiveness. I had memorized Ephesians 4:32 as a child in Sunday School, *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ, God forgave you.*
  - a. This profound insight regarding forgiveness came to me during the course of my doctoral studies in the late 1970s. I was studying the subject of forgiveness, and had returned to the Ephesian passage to study its context.  
(Read 4:30-5:2)  
*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.*
  - b. I remember I was in my clinical pastoral education internship.
    - This is a full-time clinical training program;
    - It was in a state mental hospital;
    - There were four interns and a clinical supervisor working very closely together.
    - We were required to keep notes on our interaction with each patient through the verbatim accounts in order to help us increase our counseling effectiveness with our patients

- I soon discovered that the clinical supervisor used these verbatim reports to analyze what I said and what I did not say with certain patients.
  - In other words, I found out rather quickly that the clinical training was designed to help me improve my effectiveness with patients, but just as importantly, was designed to help me gain a better understanding of myself.
- c. It was during this internship that one day my clinical supervisor said to me, “Fairbanks, when are you going to get your father off your shoulder?”
- I was rather offended by his remarks, and rather abruptly stated to my supervisor, “My father has been dead for five years.” To which he replied, “You didn’t answer my question.”
  - I really don’t recall how my supervisor knew about my father. Perhaps I had shared some information about Dad during the internship.
  - My father was an alcoholic. He did not provide for the family. During high school, I worked every evening to earn money for food for our family. He laughed at me and said cruel things about my potential success in college.
- d. You can imagine the words of my supervisor caught my attention. “Fairbanks, when are you going to get your father off your shoulder.” He continued, “Not only do you have your father looking over your shoulder on everything you do, you are walking through life with your fist up in your father’s face, as if to say, ‘I’ll show you. I’ll prove I can make it.’ And you are miserable inside,” my supervisor concluded.

- e. It was during this extremely painful period of my life that I began a prolonged study of forgiveness, and especially, the words of Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)
  - f. Let me share with you why these words of Jesus regarding forgiveness were profoundly powerful and life-changing for me.
  - g. Look at the three phases in these words of Jesus.
- I. Jesus, on the cross, cried out: “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do!”
- A. You remember the setting, do you not? (Read Luke 23:32-38)
    - Jesus was being crucified on the cross, between two thieves.
      - The soldiers mocked him.
      - A crown of thorns was placed on his head.
      - A vinegar-like substance was being pushed to his lips.
      - Spikes were nailed in his hands to help hold him on the cross.
  - B. And it was to these individuals Jesus referred when he said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”
    - 1. Was Jesus naïve? Did he really think that those who were killing him did not know what they were doing?
    - 2. Was he blinded to what they were doing and why they were doing what they were doing?
  - C. The profound answers to both of these questions are NO. Jesus was not naïve, nor was he blinded as to the intent of those killing him.

Let's move to the second phase.

- II. Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.
- A. “Forgive them.” Had they asked for forgiveness? NO. No evidence in scripture to support this.
- B. “Forgive them.” Did they realize what they were doing and pause, as if to say to one another, “Enough; he has gotten our message. Let’s not go too far.”
- And again, the answer is NO. No evidence that they paused, realized how far they had taken this person, Jesus, on the cross. NO. No remorse on the part of the killers is cited in the scriptures.
- C. Then why the forgiveness? And here is for me the profound insight that helped me break through the years of accumulated bitterness I had toward my dad.
1. Jesus was not going to permit the “words and deeds” done and said against him to break the relationship between Jesus and the Father.
    - On the cross He could have developed bitterness and resentment for what his perpetrators were doing. Instead, “Forgive them.”
  2. “But they did not ask for forgiveness,” you say. And they did know what they were doing.
    - a. To which I think Jesus would reply, “Their requesting forgiveness before forgiveness is extended is NOT the point.”
    - b. Jesus was saying to those who were killing him, “I am not going to permit your evil words and evil deeds to create bitterness and resentment within me which only leads to a rupture of the relationship I have with the Father.”

- c. In the NT, the most common Greek word for forgiveness means, literally, to release, to hurl away, to free yourself.
- C. Again, this was a profound insight regarding forgiveness.
1. For us who have been hurt by others' words or deeds, we cannot give to those who have wronged us that much control over our lives. Holding onto my hurts only increases the cycle of blame and pain. Only releasing that person, freeing yourself from the grip of preoccupation, can you refocus your energies and affection on God Himself.
  2. "Say what you want to say; do what you want to do." "I will not allow what you say or do to create bitterness, anger, and malice within me that causes a break in the relationship I have with the Father." It's just not worth it! I will not relinquish control of my life over to you! I forgive you, I release you, I free myself from you.
- D. Did you notice that the extending of forgiveness by Jesus did not change the situation? Hopefully, the power of forgiveness will loosen the strangle-hold of guilt in the Those killing Jesus did not say, "Wait, he's forgiving us...we need to stop." NO. They continued to kill Jesus.
- E. The difference in the offering of forgiveness was not external or in those who were seeking to bring harm to Jesus.
- Rather, the offering of forgiveness made all the difference internally in Jesus.
  - "My relationship with the Heavenly Father is far more critical to me than anything others may do or say."
- F. Personal illustration: "Pastor, forgive me!"

Let's look at the third phase in the words of Jesus.

III. Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.

- A. "Father..." The more you study these words, the more you realize that these words constitute a prayer. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."
- B. I have come to conclude that the words against Jesus were so strong, the pain He felt was so intense, that Jesus needed on the cross the mighty power of God working through him to forgive those who were killing him.
1. It is as if Jesus was praying, "Father, by Your grace within me, enable me, with divine love, to extend forgiveness to those around me who have not asked to be forgiven."
    - Father, by Your grace within me, enable me with divine power to reach out in forgiveness when there is no evidence that forgiveness extended will change the situation of evil words and deeds said and done against me.
    - Father, by Your grace within me, enable me with divine strength to forgive when I don't have strength from within to forgive with integrity.
    - Father, by Your grace within me, enable me, with divine resources that come only from You, to forgive because my relationship with You is so much more important and vital than the words or deeds done or said against me.
    - Father, I will not permit others to hold me in bondage, through the resentment and bitterness I could harbor, created through their

words and deeds. It's not worth the breach in the relationship I have with the Father.

- “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

2. *Grace alone He will provide,  
Strength unknown He does supply,  
Christ in us, our Cornerstone.  
We will go forth by grace alone.*

3. Our task is to forgive, God will be the judge.

### Conclusion

- I have been reading for devotions at night Phillip Yancey's latest book *What Is So Amazing About Grace?*

- \* He talks about the terrible “logic” of unforgiveness and “ungrace”—  
individuals/ families/countries

- ⇒ “He doesn't deserve to be forgiven...”

- ⇒ “She hasn't asked for forgiveness.”

- ⇒ “Look at what they have done to me.”

- \* Illustration (pg. 123) –

“Walter Wink tells of two peacemakers who visited a group of Polish Christians ten years after the end of World War II. ‘Would you be willing to meet with other Christians from West Germany?’ the peacemakers asked. ‘They want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did to Poland during the war and to begin to build a new relationship.’”

“At first there was silence. Then one Pole spoke up. ‘What you are asking is impossible. Each stone of Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood! We cannot forgive!’

“Before the group parted, however, they said the Lord’s Prayer together. When they reached the words ‘forgive us our sins as we forgive...,’ everyone stopped praying. Tension swelled in the room. The Pole who had spoken so vehemently said, ‘I must say yes to you. I could no more pray the Our Father, I could no longer call myself a Christian, if I refuse to forgive. Humanly speaking, I cannot do it, but God will give us his strength!’ Eighteen months later the Polish and West German Christians met together in Vienna, establishing friendships that continue to this day.”

- \* Reminds me of Luke 6:37-38

*Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*

- \* Yancey also talks about the uncommon spirit of forgiveness and grace
- \* But, he concludes, the illogic of grace and forgiveness is precisely the gospel message. *While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

- Listen again to Ephesians 4:1, 31-32; 5:1-2

*<sup>1</sup> As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. <sup>1</sup> Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> and*



*live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

- My challenge: Begin this new academic year by breaking the power that bitterness, resentment, and anger may have over you.
  - \* Regardless of the cost, it's not worth it.
  - \* People may have wronged you—parents, companion, a dating partner, a teacher (high school or college), an employer (MVNC or another)...
  - \* But you cannot do it by yourself—you must echo the prayer of Jesus, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”
  - \* Begin the new year with a renewed relationship with the Father...by forgiving a person who has hurt or harmed you.