

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 22, 2022**

**ANOTHER FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT:
FORGIVENESS
Colossians 3:12-17**

I want to talk with you today about another fruit of the Spirit. We have talked about the nine varieties Paul names in our countdown of the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5. I don't think these nine are the only varieties there are. There are other varieties, too, even if the Bible does not specifically call them "The fruit of the Spirit."

I see it in Colossians 3, where in the space of six verses (12-17), the apostle Paul names 10 qualities that are to characterize our lives as followers of Jesus. Here, instead of the "fruit of the Spirit," Paul uses the metaphor of the wardrobe of the Christian life. These are the kinds of qualities in which we are to clothes ourselves. Five of these qualities – kindness, gentleness, patience, love, and peace – are among the nine found in Galatians 5. The other five – compassion, humility, forbearance, forgiveness, and thankfulness – like those in the list in Galatians 5, are signs of the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian. And signs of a spiritually healthy church.

We have had a brief introduction to the practical meaning of compassion this morning through the ministry of Compassion International. At its heart, compassion is caring and concern for the suffering and needs of others, along with a desire to help in practical ways.

The spiritual fruit I want to focus on today is forgiveness, which is something everybody needs. Not just from God, but from one another as well.

I don't know if you have been following the drama being played out in Fairfax County Court between actor Johnny Depp and actress Amber Heard. She is most famous for her role as Princess Mera in the *Aquaman* movie franchise, while he is best known as Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies. I have not followed it closely, but I have seen enough to know that these are two broken, messed-up, desperately unhappy souls. Despite being rich, famous, privileged, and the objects of envy, they are both morally and spiritually lost. Regardless of the outcome of the trial, it is clear that each of them has treated the other (and other people in their lives) horribly. What they need is to forgive and to be forgiven. What they need is to be forgiven and forgiving. Most of all, what they need is to experience God's forgiving grace in their lives.

When a relationship has gone off the rails so horribly, is there any hope for redemption? Is there a place for forgiveness? Is forgiveness possible?

Last Saturday, a young man, apparently motivated by racial animosity, shot and killed 10 African-Americans at a supermarket in Buffalo, NY. When something so evil happens, is forgiveness possible?

Is it possible to forgive someone who sexually abuses children? Is it possible to forgive someone who has wounded you deeply with their words or actions, someone who has unfairly damaged your reputation? Is it possible to forgive someone who has betrayed you or been unfaithful to you? Is it possible to forgive someone whose careless act results in tragedy?

Some things, from a human point of view, just seem unforgivable. How in the world do you forgive what seems unforgivable?

C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: “Everybody thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he/she has something to forgive.” It is not just a lovely idea; it is a Christian imperative. Forgiveness is not something that comes naturally to us; it goes against the grain of our nature as sinful, broken human beings. But it is required of us as followers of Jesus. Forgiveness is not a luxury; it is a necessity. If you want to be like Jesus, if you want His character to be formed in you, forgiveness is not optional.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

The Bible has a lot to say about forgiveness. It tells us, first and foremost, that God is a forgiving God. Here is David’s testimony of God’s forgiveness in Psalm 32:

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven,
 whose sins are covered.
 Blessed are those whose sin
 the Lord does not count against them
 and in whose spirit is no deceit.
 When I kept silent (about my sin)
 my bones wasted away
 through my groaning all day long.
 [In other words, his guilt was eating him alive.]
 For day and night Your hand was heavy on me;
 my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer
 [sort of a day like today].
 Then I acknowledged my sin to You
 and did not cover up my iniquity.
 I said: “I will confess my sins to the LORD.”
 And You forgave the guilt of my sin.
 (Psalm 32:1-5)

Having experienced God’s forgiveness in his own life, David could go on to say in Psalm 103:

Praise the LORD, O my soul,
 and forget not all His benefits –
 who forgives all your sins
 and heals all your diseases,
 who redeems you from the pit (of despair)

and crowns you with love and compassion,
 who satisfies your desires with good things
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
 The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
 slow to anger, abounding in love.
 He will not always accuse,
 nor will He harbor His anger forever.
 He does not treat us as our sins deserve
 or repay us according to our iniquities.
 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is His love for those who fear Him.
 As far as the east is from the west,
 so far has He removed our transgressions from us.
 (Psalm 103:2-5, 8-12)

The unnamed author of Psalm 130 says:

If You, LORD, kept a record of sins,
 Lord, who could stand?
 [Answer: No one.]
 But with You there is forgiveness.
 (Psalm 130:3-4a)

Do you hear that? This is good news meant for everyone everywhere. In an often unforgiving world, where there is no supply chain shortage of anger, hostility, conflict, or bitterness, there is forgiveness with God. For you and me and everyone who needs it. Which is everyone. No exceptions.

WHAT JESUS SAYS

Jesus spoke about forgiveness on several occasions. In the story of the paralyzed man whose friends cut a hole in the roof of a house in order to bring him to Jesus (Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:3-12; Luke 5:18-26), as Jerry Iamurri reminded us in his message a few weeks ago, Jesus not only healed the man physically; He went beyond that and met the man's deepest need, which was the forgiveness of his sins.

In Luke 7, when a woman with a reputation for loose (immoral) living washed the feet of Jesus with her tears, wiped them with her hair, and then poured perfume on them, Jesus told her: "Your sins are forgiven" (7:48). To those who saw what the woman did and were shocked that Jesus would allow Himself to be touched by such a sinful woman, Jesus said: "Whoever has been forgiven little loves little, but one who has been forgiven many, many sins is very, very grateful" (7:47).

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14), it is the despised tax-collector who cries out to God for mercy and receives forgiveness, not the self-righteous Pharisee.

In Matthew 18, in response to a question from Peter, Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant to illustrate the biblical imperative of forgiving others time after time after time until the end of time. Peter, you recall, asked Jesus: “How many times must I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Peter wanted to know about the outer limits of forgiveness. The rabbis taught that you should forgive an offending brother or sister three times, but on the fourth offense, there was to be no more forgiveness. The rule was: Four strikes and you’re out. You don’t get any more chances. In that context, Peter may have thought he was being pretty generous to raise the limit to seven. But how does Jesus answer? “Not seven times, but 77 times (or 70 times 7)” (18:22).

Jesus is not saying that we should keep score. He is not suggesting that when the number reaches 78 (or 491), you can forget about forgiveness and go ahead and sock the offender in the nose.

What Jesus means is that every time someone sins against you – no matter how many times it has happened before; every time someone hurts you, cheats you, slanders you, offends you, sins against you in any way, and then apologizes and asks for your forgiveness, you are to forgive him. You are to forgive her, just as God forgives you no matter how many times you have to repent of the same sin.

But there is more to the story in Matthew 18, which I encourage you to read for yourself. The point of the parable is that if you are not willing to forgive others, if you refuse to extend the grace of forgiveness to someone who has wronged you, if you choose to hold onto your hurts, if you allow bitterness to take root in your heart instead of letting go of it, you cannot expect to receive forgiveness from God. You disqualify yourself from receiving forgiveness by your unforgiving attitude. Unless you forgive others from your heart, Jesus says, God will not forgive you (18:35).

This echoes and reinforces what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. After giving His disciples the Lord’s Prayer as a model for their praying, He said: “If you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15).

It is as simple – and as difficult – as that. An unwillingness to forgive cuts you off from receiving God’s forgiveness in your life. If you withhold forgiveness from others, you will not experience the freedom of God’s forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS DEFINED

One of the New Testament words for “forgive” is the verb *charizomai*. It comes from the root word *charis*, which means “grace.” Paul uses *charizomai* twice in Colossians 3:13, where he tells us to “forgive each other if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord forgave you, so you also” are to do the same. Paul uses the word twice again in Ephesians 4:32 in urging us to “forgive one another, just as in Christ God forgave you.” In one sense, forgiveness is simply about extending grace. It is about acting with grace toward others, just as God has acted with grace – and continues to act with grace – toward us.

One spiritual principle to glean from this is that forgiven people forgive. Forgiven people *must* forgive. If you want to be forgiven, you must forgive. If you want God to extend the grace of forgiveness to you, you must extend the grace of forgiveness to others. The corollary to this principle is that forgiving people are forgiven people. And, when you forgive others, you reveal and reflect the heart of God.

Here is a good definition of forgiveness: It is the elimination of all desire for revenge and ill will toward those who injure us (Douglas Showalter). It is letting go of the hatred, anger, resentment, bitterness, or ill will we feel toward someone who has hurt us or someone we love.

As followers of Jesus, your life and mine are to be marked by the grace, by the fruit, of forgiveness. An unforgiving Christian (like an unloving Christian) is a contradiction in terms. It is an oxymoron. Christians who know we have been forgiven by God ought to be the most gracious, forgiving people in the whole world.

Sometimes, though, we have trouble forgiving. It may be due to our hardheartedness. Or it could be because we don't fully grasp the meaning of forgiveness. Basic to our understanding of forgiveness is the idea that forgiveness is the opposite of revenge. When you forgive, you give up the right to retaliate. Listen to what the Bible says in Romans 12:17-21: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil Do not take revenge, dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." On the contrary, "If you see your enemy hungry, buy that person lunch, or if (she's) thirsty, get (her) a drink. Your generosity will surprise (them) with goodness" (12:17a, 19 [NIV], 20 [MSG]). Forgiveness means you give up the right to get even with the person who has hurt you.

UNDERSTANDING FORGIVENESS

Here are a few more ingredients that go into a proper biblical understanding of forgiveness:

- Forgiveness is not treating a wrong as if it doesn't matter. Forgiveness is needed precisely because it does matter. If it didn't matter, there would be no need for forgiveness.
- Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. It is possible to forgive without forgetting. You can forget something that happened without really forgiving the person who did it. As John Ortberg said, all that forgetting requires is a bad memory. Which means, forgetting may have absolutely nothing to do with forgiving. While both forgiving and forgetting may be ideal, it is possible to forgive without forgetting. In fact, forgiving is especially necessary when you can't forget. Some things can never be forgotten. Some things *must* never be forgotten. So that we never allow them to happen again. But we must move on. We must move forward, instead of living in the hurt of the past.
- Forgiving is not the same as trusting. Forgiving someone who has hurt you in some way doesn't mean you have to (or should) restore that person to a place of trust in your life. Trust has to be earned. If it is broken, it has to be re-earned. Which is not easy.

- Forgiveness is not dependent on repentance. You don't have to wait for an offender to repent and apologize before you take the step of forgiveness. Amber Heard doesn't have to wait for Johnny Depp to apologize before forgiving him. Nor does Johnny Depp need to wait for Amber Heard to apologize. Forgiveness can be unilateral. It is not dependent on repentance. If it were, you could never forgive anyone who hurt you but never repented and is now dead. You don't have to wait for the person who hurt you to apologize.
- Forgiveness is not given because the offender deserves it. Forgiveness, like grace, is never deserved. God doesn't forgive us because we deserve to be forgiven. He forgives us because it is His nature to be gracious and forgiving. We don't forgive others because they deserve it. Forgiveness is never deserved. It is a gift. A gift that everybody needs.
- Forgiveness doesn't cancel the consequences of a person's actions. It does not undo what a person has done. It doesn't let an offender off the hook from the requirements of justice. Actions have consequences. Even when we are forgiven, we have to suffer the consequences of our actions.
- Forgiveness doesn't always lead to reconciliation or the healing of a relationship. Sometimes it does. But not always. Forgiveness can be unilateral, but reconciliation is a two-way street. Always. It depends on both the offender and the offended. It takes two to do the tango of reconciliation. You can't force someone to be reconciled to you against their will. Only God can change their heart.
- Forgiveness is always a choice and is always possible with God's help. Always. Even when it seems impossible.

You may have heard this story before. Corrie Ten Boom and her family in Holland hid Jews from the Nazis in their home during WW2. When they were found out, the whole family was arrested. Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to the concentration camp at Ravensbruck, where Betsie died. But Corrie survived. After the war, she went back to Germany with the message of God's forgiveness. "When we confess our sins," she said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I can't find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says NO FISHING ALLOWED."

One evening as she spoke, she saw him, a man she recognized instantly as having been a guard at Ravensbruck. One of the cruel guards, in fact. He made his way forward until he stood in front of Corrie, thrust his hand out and said: "How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea." Corrie fumbled in her pocketbook, wondering if this man might remember her. He did not. He said he had been a guard at Ravensbruck but had since become a Christian. "I know God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there," he said, "but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein" – again he extended his hand – "will you forgive me?"

Corrie stood there, frozen momentarily as she struggled with the most difficult thing she had ever had to do. Betsie had died in that place. And how many others? Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply for the asking? Corrie understood what Jesus had said about forgiveness. She knew she had to do it, hard as it was.

She prayed silently: “Jesus, help me! I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.” “Woodenly, mechanically,” she says, she thrust out her hand to the one stretched out to her. As she did, she felt the healing warmth of God’s love and said: “I do forgive you!” (Corrie Ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord*, 53-55).

Forgiveness is a choice. It is always possible with God’s help. Always. It was possible for Corrie Ten Boom. It is possible for Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. And for you and me.

In his book, *Everybody’s Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, John Ortberg says: “We are always to pursue forgiving people who have hurt us, even when offenders don’t ask for or deserve it. God commands us to forgive because it is the best way to live. He commands us to forgive because He has forgiven us; He is the Great Forgiver. He commands it because the only other way is to remain a prisoner of the hurt for as long as I live. God commands forgiving because to refuse to forgive means I allow the one who hurt me to keep me chained in a prison of bitterness. No human beings are more miserable than the unforgiving (Ortberg, 160).

Is there someone you need to forgive today? Someone in your family? In our church family? Are there some unresolved hurts from the past you need to finally let go of?

Is there someone whose forgiveness you need to seek?

Do it today. Don’t let any root of unforgiveness poison your life or the life of our church. Let forgiveness be one of the distinguishing marks of your life as a follower of Jesus.

Norman Cousins once described life as an adventure in forgiveness. May we live the adventure, to the glory of God. The fruit of the Spirit is forgiveness. Lord, let it be so in us and in our life together. Amen.