

From Savages to Saints: A Story of Gospel-Powered Forgiveness, and Our Story (Ephesians 4:32-5:2)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on April 22, 2012

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This passage has potential to change every life present here, understanding what forgiveness is biblically, and how hearts are changed in the process and how the gospel empowers forgiveness. As we study through this book of Ephesians verse-by-verse week-by-week, this may be one of the most timely and vitally important and potentially revolutionary of all the studies we've done in terms of our relationships with each other. So I'm praying for and aiming for lives to be changed, and relationships to be restored or strengthened by the power of the gospel, which is at the center of this text and its source of power:

4:32 *Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. 5:1* *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; ² and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us ...*

Again the standard and source and strength is Christ in the gospel. Now listen to these parallel words of Christ in the gospel of Luke: "...**love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you** ... [and just like in Eph. it's tied to our identity as children] **sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful** ... pardon' (Lk 6:27-28, 35-37)

We have received better than a presidential pardon, a pardon from the King of Kings for our infinitely massive and un-payable debt towards Him, so how can we not do the same with lesser debts and sins toward us? Listen again the words of Christ in the gospel:

Matthew 18:32 "... *I forgave you **all that debt** because you pleaded with me. **Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?**"*

The Lord taught His disciples to pray "*And forgive us **our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil** ... [then 1 verse later] *if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you* (Matt 6:12, 14)*

Those who are able to forgive others show they know forgiveness from God their Father. The truly forgiven will be forgiving people. Jesus said we should be regularly praying, "God forgive me my trespasses, *in the exact same manner and same measure I've been forgiving those who trespass against me.*" Can you pray that? If not ... pray, "God forgive me *for my sin of un-forgiveness*, and help me to forgive others their sins as you've forgiven mine." It says right after that "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" -- may God deliver from the evil temptation of un-forgiveness.

Jesus told some of His longest stories in the gospels to illustrate the gospel power of God's forgiveness (half of Mt 18, most of Lk 15). And I want to take a few minutes in that same pattern to tell you a story as we start today, the most amazing forgiveness story of any people I've ever met personally, a story of how the gospel of Jesus transformed their lives, and I hope it impacts yours like it has mine

- It's a story of 2 families in 2 countries, covering 2 centuries on 2 continents
- One family knew Jesus, the other family didn't know Jesus
- One family was missionaries, the other murderers, spearing their own people to death and any outsiders who came near
- That was Dayuma's family of savage warriors; Rachel's family wanted to reach that family with the gospel of peace
- It's a story of savages and saints (literal savages in Ecuador and Rachel's were literally saints, that was their last name)
- Some of you already know this story, but consider it afresh in light of today's text

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How is that sort of forgiveness possible? Only through the power of the gospel! There is no human or natural explanation for that sort of forgiveness and fellowship and family affection shared by those people – only the supernatural soul-transforming gospel of Jesus!

Elisabeth Elliot later wrote how the gospel moved her to love her enemies, even laying down herself for them. She believed Christ died for the Waodani, but knowing her husband died for them, too, made her love them more (see her book *The Savage My Kinsman*)

The gospel turns killers to kinsmen. Remember Paul himself as he writes Ephesians 4:32, Paul was once a killer of Christians, but he was later welcomed as their kinsmen and family in Christ. It is the gospel that is the power of God to transform mass-murderers to missionaries (which the Waodoni now are to other tribes, seeking to reach others). The gospel literally can turn savages into saints. And the gospel changes those who are forgiven to forgive others.

If those missionaries could forgive ... you can forgive, if you know the same forgiveness and the same gospel, by the same grace. You can't say "I can never forgive so-and-so" if you know the God who has done the impossible in forgiving your far greater sin, if you trust Him to do what seems impossible in you.

The *kindness* of Eph 4:32 is not something produced in our heart naturally, it is a fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5:22 that God produces. It is something the gospel produces and powers. We see this word back in Ephesians 2:7 as the heart of what the gospel saves us to and for: *so that in the ages to come He might show **the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ***

It's the word used in 1 Pet 2:3 "if you've tasted the *kindness* of the Lord"; other versions say "that he is *gracious/good*." Taste and see that the Lord is good, gracious, and kind, Scripture says, and it also uses this word for what leaves a good taste in the mouth (Luke 5:39). Our kindness should leave a good taste in other's mouth.

When 4:32 says we're to be *tender-hearted*, or *compassionate*, it's the root word used of Jesus, moved in His heart towards multitudes of people he saw needing healing or like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus used this word in His parable of a slave who owed his master 10,000 talents [billions of \$] ... *the lord of that slave felt **compassion** and released him and forgave him the debt* (Mt 18:27)

What Dayuma and Rachel and Marj and Steve and Elisabeth and the families of those missionaries had to forgive is not as massive as what God forgave us, but when we can see how big *our sin* problem is, and remember how big our Savior is, and how big and massive His grace is in the gospel, then the first part of v. 32 is empowered by the last: “*just as God in Christ has forgiven you.*”

Now, some people will latch onto that phrase and say the gospel is only for repentant people, therefore v. 32 are only things we’re to do to those who repent and ask us for forgiveness. And since that rarely happens, we rarely have to do what v. 32 commands. If you follow the logic, “just as God in Christ has forgiven you...” God doesn’t forgive us before we repent, so we can withhold what v. 32 commands of us before they repent. But we need to be careful not to use or abuse that or excuse us having attitudes or actions in v. 31

Bitterness in v. 31, anger, etc., grow when we’re not doing v. 32. The sun goes down on our anger in v. 26 when we’re not seeking to put on the heart of forgiveness, kindness, tender-heartedness, and instead we can become unforgiving, unkind, and hard-hearted.

Look at v. 32 again more closely. Is God *kind* (v. 32a) only to the repentant? I already read from Luke 6 earlier where it says God is kind to evil men. He is kind all the time in His common grace to let evil and ungrateful and unrepentant people live and move and have their being and keep breathing and even enjoy earthly blessings.

Romans 2:4 says God’s *kindness* is something that should lead us to repentance, it’s not something only shown after repentance, in fact the point of Romans 2:4 is God is kind to the still unrepentant. And notice 4:32 doesn’t say “forgiving one another *if and only if they repent.*” There is repentance associated with forgiveness in Luke 17:3, where there’s a relational reconciliation idea, but there are many verses that call us to forgive and don’t give qualification.

In Luke 7, this same Greek word translated “forgive” here is used for the healing Jesus gave freely to all in v. 21, and in v. 42 for a debt a man couldn’t repay, and it’s translated “graciously forgave.” This Greek word can mean unconditional or unilateral forgiveness.

The root idea of this word is the gracious giving or bestowing or granting of something unmerited and undeserved, not because the other party did something, but because of a gracious decision. So it might be helpful to translate Eph 4:32 the way this word often is used: “*choose to be gracious as God chose to be gracious to you.*” This type of forgiving doesn’t depend on the sinner, but on the Savior.

There are different words translated “forgive” in NT. This one has the Grk word *charis*, “grace,” same as Eph 2:5, God’s action to us in our undeserving and unresponsive state of spiritual death when He by grace took the initiative. God calls us to take the initiative for those who may not respond or deserve it, by grace, *like God did for us*. The point is not how strict I can be in conditions the sinner must meet before Eph 4:32, the point is how free and gracious I’m to be, as Jesus said, “*Freely you received, freely give*” (Matt 10:8).

5:1 continues: *Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children...*

Just like human children imitate their father, God's children are to imitate their Father in heaven. Sons and daughters of God manifest the same nature as their Father in heaven by choosing graciousness and tenderheartedness and kindness toward those deserving wrath.

The word "imitators" is the Greek word we get "mimic" from, a person who moves like and copies the characteristics of another. When kids learn to draw, they sometimes learn by tracing, and to the degree they look to the pattern, it looks like the original. The more we look to the pattern of Jesus, the more we can be like God. We need to look to Jesus, and look like Jesus, God's Beloved Son.

Remember what God said from heaven at the baptism of Jesus: "*This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*" (Matt. 3:17). In the gospels that language is only used of Jesus but Eph 5:1 uses it of us as "beloved sons and daughters" also. How is this amazing blessing possible? Ephesians 1:6 says God freely bestows blessings on us (or "highly favors us") *in the Beloved*. He treats us as Christ in Christ. The Father loves us *as His Own Beloved Son*. Jn 17:23: "... *You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.*"

In light of this amazing truth, what else can we do? ² *and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us ...*

We'll look at that more next time in the flow of chapter 5, but for today I want us to see again that it is the gospel that empowers this. In order to love and give of ourselves and forgive sins toward us, we can't look within, or look around, we have to look up to the cross. 1 John 3:16 *By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren*

Jesus connected the gospel and forgiveness and love in Luke 7. He taught those who know they're forgiven much, will love much, but those who don't know how much they're forgiven, will love little.

When we don't forgive, we deny the gospel and destroy ourselves. Unforgiveness is the poison we drink, hoping others will die." But at the cross, Jesus drank the poison cup instead. He drank the cup from His father of bitter wrath. He died for our sin.

Below is adapted from Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker, 2004, chap. 6, 10) [Explanations in brackets added by Pastor Phil to summarize]

Forgiving as God in Christ Forgave You (Eph 4:32, Col. 3:13)

- 1. You cannot do it alone [you need gospel grace in Christ]**
- 2. Neither a feeling, nor forgetting, nor excusing ['that's ok']**
- 3. The attitude of forgiveness is a decision [grace-enabled]**
 - [starts with a heart attitude to forgive, whether or not the offender asks forgiveness (Mark 11:25);

“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone...” [Note the sinner isn’t there asking forgiveness, anytime you’re praying and have something against someone, it is a present tense imperative/command: forgive, continually forgive]

MacArthur writes: ‘this forgiveness takes place *while the forgiver stands praying*. “Forgive” is the clear command of that verse, and it is to take place on the spot ... This kind of forgiveness involves a deliberate decision ... refuses to hold a grudge, relinquishes any claim on recompense, and resists the temptation to brood or retaliate. The offended party simply bears the insult. The offense is set aside, lovingly covered for Christ’s sake ... People who insist on confronting every wrong often simply stir strife—the antithesis of what Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness was intended to produce. Real love should *cover* the vast majority of transgressions, not constantly haul them out in the open for dissection (1 Pet. 4:8).’¹

- **it includes putting off bitterness, resentment, or anger, and being kind to the offender, with a heart of tenderness and forgiveness (Eph 4:31-32);**
- **you must show love to them, do good to them, bless them and pray for them (Luke 6:27-28), be merciful as God is to you in the gospel, v. 35-36]**

Ken Sande writes: ‘You may need to bear certain effects of the other person’s sin over a long period of time. This may involve fighting against painful memories, speaking gracious words when you really want to say something hurtful, working to tear down walls and be vulnerable when you still feel little trust, or even enduring the consequences ... that the other person is unable or unwilling to repair. Forgiveness can be extremely costly, but if you believe in Jesus, you have more than enough to make these payments. By going to the cross, he has already paid off the ultimate debt for sin and established an account of abundant grace in your name. As you draw on that grace through faith day by day, you will find that you have all that you need to make the payments of forgiveness for those who have wronged you.’²

Turn to Isa. 43 for more on how and why God in Christ forgives

When Granting Forgiveness in Person, You Are Promising:

1. **I won’t bring up to myself/dwell on [Jer 31:34b, Mic 7:19]**

Micah 7:19 “*You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*”

Jer 31:34 ‘... *declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.*”

To forgive like the Lord means we don’t keep bringing the incident back up from the ocean floor, like dragging up some old garbage. I think Lou Priolo is right when he says *remember no more* doesn’t mean God has amnesia, instead, because of the gospel, He forgives and chooses not to remember, hold against us, or dwell on our sin.³

One book gives has a chapter “How Do I Stop Thinking About it?”

- Burn into your mind what the Bible teaches about forgiveness
- Take a long look at Christ in his Word (Psalm 77:10-12)
- Pray, pray, pray (Philippians 4:4-7)
- Say and do the right things, participate in the means of grace⁴

2. I won't bring up this incident again to you [Isa. 38:17]

“... *I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back.*” (ESV) [i.e., it's in the past now, behind us, can't reach]

3. I won't bring up this incident to others [Isa. 43:25]

*I, even I, am the one who **wipes out** your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins.* [for His sake, not me. If you have a trouble forgiving someone, don't do it for their sake, or for your sake, but for Christ's sake, refuse to remember that sin]

Jay Adams: ‘omniscient God who created and sustains the universe does not forget, but He can “not remember.”...forgetting is passive and is something that we human beings, not being omniscient, do. “Not remembering” is active; it is a promise whereby one person (in this case, God) determines not to remember the sins of another *against him*. To “not remember” is simply a graphic way of saying, “I will not bring up these matters to you or others in the future. I will bury them and not exhume the bones to beat you over the head with them. I will never use these sins against you.”’⁵

4. I won't keep up a wall between us or let this incident hinder our personal relationship [Isa 59:2, Eph 2:13-17]

To forgive as God does means we should promise these four things. Sin puts a wall of separation between us and God (Isa 59:2) and us and others, but as we've seen in the past in Ephesians 2, Jesus fought the battle at Calvary, and the walls came tumblin' down.

Sande: ‘*good thought, hurt you not, gossip never, friends forever*’

[Renewed thinking]: renounce sinful attitudes and expectations, realize your sin, recognize God is working for good, remember God's forgiveness in the gospel, rely on His strength to forgive... [Corrie ten Boom wrote of meeting a Christian after church who was one of the Nazi soldiers who had been her prison guard at the concentration camp where her sister died from the brutality of it]

“How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,” he said. “To think that, as you say, he has washed my sins away!”

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached ... about the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? “Lord Jesus,” I prayed, “forgive me and help me to forgive him.”

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer, “Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.”

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me ... When he tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love'⁶

The ideal of forgiveness is reconciliation. How do we reconcile?

When Asking Forgiveness – The Seven “A’s” of Confession:

- 1. Address everyone involved [Luke 19:8]**
- 2. Avoid “If,” “But,” and “Maybe” [Ps 32:5, Ps 51]**
- 3. Admit specifically [Luke 15:21]**
- 4. Acknowledge the hurt [James 5:16]**
- 5. Accept the consequences [Luke 15:19, Numbers 5:5-7]**
- 6. Alter your behavior [Acts 19:18-19]**
- 7. Ask for forgiveness (allow time) [Mt 6:12, Gen 50:17]**

¹ John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 121-23.

² Ken Sande, *The PeaceMaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker, 2004), p. 208.

³ Lou Priolo, *The Heart of Anger* (Calvary Press Publishing, 1997), 178-80.

⁴ Chris Braun, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Crossway, 2008), p. 171-74.

⁵ Jay Edward Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 12.

⁶ Sande, 218, citing Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (New York: Bantam, 1974), p. 238.