

Relational Peace

FOCUS: Without forgiveness, there is no true reconciliation and no true relational peace. We are called to follow our Father (be his children) by forgiving one another as he has forgiven us.

FUNCTION: That hearers would be encouraged to take steps of forgiveness as their contribution towards relational peace.

1. Intro – missing peace without forgiveness

This is not a surprise twist kind of sermon! Can anyone guess what the key to relational peace is? ASK

Forgiveness – I hope this would not be a surprise to anyone who has been a Christian for any length of time. But it might not receive the same agreement from our wider culture as it once did. I've been feeling a bit uneasy about this for a while. This week I read an essay by American Christian pastor and writer Tim Keller called **The Fading of Forgiveness**. It really effectively put into words this feeling I've been unable to articulate – that American / Western culture is moving away from forgiveness. I recommend a read! But here is the heart of what Keller is saying –

Influences in our world are starting to make forgiveness problematic. The first of these influences is a therapeutic culture – “*looking inward to forge one's own identity based on our desires and then moving outward to demand that society honour our individuality and interests.*” (be true to yourself then make sure everyone else is true to you too).

The second influence is what Keller calls a rising honour and shame culture of victimhood – we are encouraged to think of ourselves as ‘*individuals needing protection from society and from various groups with power who oppress us*’. The more one has been oppressed and victimised, the more honour and moral virtue is accrued. On top of this, those who defend victims are also given honour – resulting in a scramble for business, government and other power structures to be seen supporting victims and mercilessly punishing victimisers. This results in a “*society of constant good v evil conflict over the smallest issues as people compete for status as victims or defenders*”.

These influences undermine the very concept of forgiveness and reconciliation! Forgiveness is now seen as ‘*radically unjust and impractical*’, as it short-circuits victims' ability to gain honour and virtue as others rise to defend them. What's more, in a world where values themselves are honoured rather than the God who created them, there is no way to find forgiveness when we fall short of them.

So what does our culture say about forgiveness these days? It should be used sparingly, only given to the deserving (?!), is often an unhelpful shortcut in the fight for rights and is even seen as supporting power structures where the weaker party forgives the stronger. If we do choose to forgive, we should do it mainly for the benefit we receive ourselves from no longer holding on to the pain and bitterness.

Is it any wonder we live in an increasingly divided and peaceless world?

And what about us? We've been forgiven – are we good at it ourselves? We might hold back from harsh vocal judgements (and that's good!) But do we hide our lack of forgiveness under a layer of quiet politeness or avoidance? Do we bury our hurt or anger? Or do we forgive but avoid, refuse to go the further step of reconciling? None of these will bring us relational peace. Christmas reminds us how lucky we are that God does not see forgiveness as the world does! So set is he on reconciling with us, that he is willing to bear the cost by sending his Son, extending mercy and grace to undeserving humans.

2. Forgive as in Christ, God forgave us

Now let's have a look at how God views forgiveness –

Ps 86:5 – You, LORD, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call on you

God is not stingy, or capricious. He doesn't draw out the process to help us learn the lesson. He doesn't declare in tragic tones, I can never forgive you!

God is forgiving in his very character, his graciousness and generosity mean he is just longing, champing at the bit to offer forgiveness to whoever asks him for it. Psalms like 32 encourage us not to hang back or put it off, dam it up.

God also makes it crystal clear that he expects us to forgive like he does, and that our forgiveness by him flows out to forgiving others.

Have a look at these verses –

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Col 3:13 NIV

Finally brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you 2 Cor 13:111 NIV

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you – Eph 4:32 (NIV) (MSG – Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you)

See how each verse has the two parts – call for how we are to forgive and then reminder that we have already experienced God's forgiveness.

Double back to the bigger picture – 4:1-5 – (Read v 1 and pause)

4 *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one*

Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

When you paused to visualise the life worthy of the calling, I wondered what you pictured? The 'life worthy of the calling' IS love, unity and **peace** with one another – nothing about an individual life of holiness and inwardness!

3. Take some steps...

Now, if you still disagree that Christians are to forgive one another as in Christ God forgave us, come and see me afterwards and we'll thrash it out. But we know that that's the easy part. The hard part is acting on God's call to forgive. How do we do it?

Earlier in the year, Chris B and I went to Peacewise workshop. A bit about Peacewise – goal is to provide people with a framework for people to do conflict well, forgive, reconcile and live in peace (more workshops next year). Nothing will make forgiving someone easy but perhaps knowing what steps to take can make it just a little less daunting. Want to share a bit with you.

Peacewise says forgiveness begins with 2 steps –

- A decision to extend mercy – while recognising that mercy, by its nature is undeserved.
- An action to show mercy – whether or not the person responds to such action

These two steps mirror God's forgiveness to us.

Is there a relationship you have that needs reconciling? If so, what wd these two steps look like for you? Perhaps you have completed the first step but not the second? PAUSE

4. And make some promises...

These steps are just the beginning. The hard work of forgiveness is to **continue in it!**

Peacewise offers 4 promises to help with this, and to paint a picture of what forgiveness looks like –

1. I will not dwell on this incident
2. I will not bring up the incident and use it against the person
3. I will not talk to others about this incident
4. I will not allow this incident to stand between us and hinder our relationship

Which of these promises is the hardest to keep / most tempting to break? For me, 1, 3 stretches me.

5. Keeping in mind...

3 things we need to keep in mind –

- We must forgive wholeheartedly
- We can only be responsible for our part and this may mean reconciliation is not possible.
- Forgiveness does not replace justice or safety – consequences may still follow

6. The driving motive for forgiveness is peace

I said earlier, a lot of the cultural wisdom around us urges us to forgive others mainly because it is good for us. Dr Maya Angelou, poet, author and civil rights activist – *It's one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive. Forgive Everyone.*

It is true that forgiveness is good for us. Everything God commands us to do is good for us! So forgiveness brings peace to the forgiver as well as the forgiven and can be experienced by the forgiver even if the forgiven does not accept it.

But as Chns this is not our driving motive. Our driving motive is to bring the peace we know through reconciling to God to each other and to all people.

We have no need to buy into a culture that seeks honour, in victimhood or anything else. Keller – Chns don't have the right, the ability or the need to bring God's judgement down on others. No right – it is for God to avenge, no ability – only God knows what any person deserves, no need – no-one will get away with anything in the end.

So we are called not to judge but to be peacemakers – to be reconciled and to help others to do the same. Who or what is the Holy Spirit drawing to your attention today? Where can you contribute to relational peace on earth?

Finally brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you 2 Cor 13:111 NIV