

The Choice of Forgiveness

Living in Unity:

Ephesians 4:17-24, 31-32

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I'm beginning to feel the excitement. In two weeks, I will be blessed with the gift of a daughter-in-law. She will be included in our family unit. I think this parallels our situations as Christian brothers and sisters.

We are a spiritual family unit through the gift of adoption. We are baptized into the same name – Jesus, the same identity – Christ. We belong to each other. Our unity is a gift from God. We share one body (family) and one father. Part of that gift is our name. When Jesus prayed in John 17, he said:

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name — the name you gave me — so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. (John 17:11-12, NIV)

Jesus protects us from judgment and division with his name. We can't get away from one another by changing churches. Whether we call ourselves Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic or independent, we still share the name Jesus, belong to one family, and will be held accountable for attitudes and actions that divide us. We resolve nothing by leaving one another. We may

think we can be godly and live estranged from one another, but a divided family is a disobedient family. Our heavenly Father does not tolerate disunity. It runs counter to his nature.

Jesus prayed:

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity... (John 17:22-23, NIV)

Last month we learned that Jesus gave us his glory so that we might live in unity. The Bible says:

Parents are the pride (glory) of their children. (Proverbs 17:6, NIV)

Kids love to brag about their parents. The glory of Jesus is God, his Father. John wrote this of Jesus in his gospel:

We beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father... (John 1:14, NKJV)

Jesus gives to us the glory of being children of God. Jesus provides us full rights to live and be God's child. Consequently, Paul writes:

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." (Galatians 4:6, NIV)

As we welcome the Spirit of God's Son into our hearts, we experience an urge to bond with God and his family. We feel a bond with Jesus' followers. This is gift.

Similarly, as a gift, I will soon have a daughter-in-law identified with my family and me. With this change in identity and status we are drawn to meet one another, know one another and care for one another. That is what is happening to us all.

Our common identity and relationship is a gift that draws us together; however, we must choose to keep it that way. That is true for us believers. We are commanded:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit... (Ephesians 4:3, NIV)

We don't have to create unity. That has been done for us. We have to keep the unity that God has created. We have to keep the unity that is assaulted by our sinful tongue, our sinful attitudes and our sinful actions.

We talked last week of the pride we have in Christ's redemption. With tears, suffering and the death of his only begotten Son, God values you and me as his children, his companions, and his chiefs over the earth. However, we sinfully assert our value outside that relationship. We work to prove our value, or we demand that people acknowledge our value. We are the family of the King of kings. We are the companions and confidants of the Lord of lords; and like him, we are on assignment. We are here not to be served, but to serve.

For us to keep the unity we will have to deal with our sins and the sins of others. We will have to face our selfishness and the selfishness of others. We will have to address both our impure and deceived hearts and the impure and deceived hearts of others. The way that we think and then act defeats our unity. It pulls us apart. Consequently, we must change some of our thinking:

You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. (Ephesians 4:17-18, NIV)

We all want to feel that our behavior is acceptable. We often excuse our thinking and insulate ourselves from critique. We let peers and popular positions color our thoughts rather than the word of the Lord. Do we want to know what God thinks, intensely enough to ponder what he has scripted for us to read and heed? In Ephesians 4:23 we are taught that we must choose to be made new in the attitude of our minds. We must change the way we think about things so that they reflect our heavenly Father's perspective. We are commanded:

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. (Ephesians 4:31-32, NIV)

The choice of forgiveness requires more than saying, “I forgive you.” It requires thinking. It requires recognizing bitter thoughts. You must give no room to words and thoughts that inspire rage and anger. You must refuse to entertain in your mind the swing of a fist or the cutting retort.

God could talk himself into staying angry with us. God could think how kind he has been to us and how we have repaid him in rebellion and unbelief. God could think of all the hardships we create, of all the harm we’ve done, all the repercussions of our sins and the many victims. Actually, God doesn’t have to think of that. Satan reminds him. Remember the story of Job? Satan stood before God and accused Job. When Nathan the prophet confronted David about his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah, he said:

By this deed, you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme
(2 Samuel 7:11, NASB).

God hears all about our sins from his enemies. In Revelation 12:10 John calls Satan:

The accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before God day and night.

God, therefore, is constantly reminded of our misdeeds; however, he has chosen to think and act in kindness and compassion. God placed Jesus in the heavenly courtroom to say: “I paid for Wes’s sin.” Hear Jesus tell God, “I paid for the sin of your daughter (son) “so and so.”

Similarly, when you are faced with wounds and hurts, remember God’s mercy for you, and remember your assignment. You must surrender to the Lord the issue of justice and focus on your mission of extending the kindness, compassion shown you. Jesus came not to judge

sinners, but to save them; and you must come with that same mind. You are led by the Spirit of the Savior, who shed his blood for you and for those who hurt you.

Have you been thinking negatively about some individuals? Rid yourself of those thoughts. You were put in relationship by God and are called to serve as their advocate. Surround their names with thoughts of kindness and mercy. Realize how God values you, and value them the same way. See their potential, even in your pain. The choice to forgive is more than a decision to hold people harmless and blameless for hurtful acts. Forgiveness values and loves people in our thoughts, and then in our words and deeds. The choice to forgive is absolutely necessary to keep the unity you've been given: unity with one another and even more important, unity with God.