

“..., and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

How did you become a Christian? I don't think many people get asked that question. When I ask that question, occasionally, someone will tell me a conversion story but for the most part I get something like, “I don't know. I just am.” So it is, but let's stop there; let's pretend that we are from some place where the Gospel is rarely heard or that it's even unknown. Given those circumstances, how would you become a Christian?

Paul had that challenge in writing to the Ephesians. He was trying to grow Christians in challenging circumstances. Ephesus contained one of the wonders of the ancient world, a beautiful temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis. Naturally, given the importance of the temple and its worship, nearly everyone in the community had at least a passing knowledge of the worship of Artemis; nearly everyone was invested in its success. When Paul came preaching a salvation won by Christ on the cross, he faced a difficult situation—just how do you become a Christian in those circumstances? Imagine, most of the citizens knew how to worship Artemis—they had grown up with Artemis--but just what must we do to be Christian? We know how to follow Artemis but how do we follow Christ?

Paul didn't treat faith as a concept or even a good idea—Paul believed that if you wanted to be a Christian you took up a certain way of life. Earlier in the letter, Paul has been urging the Ephesian church members to get along with one another, to lay aside any divisions they might have as Jews and Greeks, Romans, and follower of Artemis. Paul writes earlier in this morning's reading advice that curiously, doesn't require any specifically Christian behavior. It's rather secular in fact. To some extent, what Paul urges doesn't even require any particularly religious behavior. If we were to step back and take a long view of this part of Paul's letter, we could imagine Paul's advice to the church to have been taken right out of Poor Richard's Almanac, written by Ben Franklin. Paul contends that if we want to get along with one another, we should always, always tell the truth. Now, there's

a concept in any age! We should give up stealing, anger that only serves our own needs and whatever else that divides our community including bitterness, wrath, quarreling among ourselves. As I said earlier, if we stop right there, we could appreciate this advice in any age, in the time of Paul, or Ben Franklin and even today. Paul offers sound practical advice we could follow in any era.

At this point though, the wheel of Paul’s argument turns. He writes, “...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” There it is, the big difference—we should forgive one another because Christ in God has forgiven us. With this advice, Paul has added something new, something fundamentally unexpected in the ancient world. Up to this point, anyone could follow Paul’s advice to their advantage but now Paul has added a critical element, forgiveness—that we should forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Just what does that mean? The Ephesians were no different from many people in the ancient world—a grudge was not easily relinquished and, in some cases, was to be encouraged and nourished. Now, to be sure, not everyone thought that way but in terms of daily practice, but in those days, if someone has hurt you then you hurt them back.

Paul turns to an entirely different practice. He tells us that Christians are called on to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us. How does that work? That’s a very important question. Why? Because Paul has been teaching that God practices absolute, unconditional forgiveness through the power of the cross. Bottom line, we shouldn’t calculate how to hold a grudge, how long to hold a resentment or any other measurement of revenge. If we wish to follow Christ, we are to forgive. The only measurement Paul offers of forgiveness is to forgive entirely, completely, and absolutely.

If we look back on Paul’s advice, we see that there’s something entirely new undergirding his advice to the Ephesians—if we want to be a whole and healthy community, we need to act and do these behaviors but not just for their own sake—not because we want to just get along. Instead, we give up anger, stealing, quarreling because at the cornerstone of our lives,

God forgives us. In other words, we have religious reasons, divine reasons for living as we do. What are those reasons? Just this, that we live as we do because Christ lived as he did. He forgave, he healed hearts, he loved us all.

That brings us to Paul's final point in this part of the letter. If we want to know what it means to be a Christian, then we must imitate Christ. Notice, Paul says nothing about checking off rules or following some other prescription for behavior. Paul wants us to imitate Christ so we can learn the art of being Christian. Paul is not slavish about this—we're not compelled against our will to follow Christ. We follow Christ because we have experienced how forgiveness works.

I've been taking painting classes for the last couple of years and honestly, the best way we learn is to imitate the example of our instructors. Now, if you thought you could learn to paint by slavish imitation, then paint by numbers is for you! But even dear Bob Ross didn't do that. Instead, we imitate the masters until we can be masters ourselves. Just like music or dance or a host of other things we learn, we imitate until we can dance all by ourselves, until we can paint with abandon, enjoying our mastery.

Paul knew and knows how to be a Christian—we imitate Christ. That's not as hard as it sounds; Paul gives us some practical tools including don't argue for arguing sakes and always tell the truth. No miracles are required, no special challenges (like driving out demons). Instead, we have one brilliant practice--we must imitate and master—we must forgive, as God forgives us. Completely, utterly and without condition. That's it? Really, in the end, how hard can that be to forgive? Amen.

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