

Forgive to Stand Firm

Thinking through the question of what is essential to establish a thriving, healthy church there are keys we are quick to come to: preaching the gospel (grace to the sinner), friendly welcome, diversity in age and ethnicity... but something just as essential, and far harder to accomplish, rarely makes our lists of things that will help a church grow.

Forgiveness. Something we cling to and long to experience ourselves, but something more difficult for us to give, to extend to others.

Jesus knew it would be hard, and he knew it is essential.

Matthew 18:21–35 “Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” [22] Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

[23] “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. [24] When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. [25] And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. [26] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ [27] And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. [28] But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ [29] So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ [30] He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. [31] When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. [32] Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33] And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ [34] And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all

his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (ESV)

When we hear it we think “of course” that punk gets what’s coming to him for not forgiving... but when we live a little and grow in self-awareness and realize there are times this could be a story about you and me.

Faced with forgiving someone who has slighted us, hurt us - especially in the church, we have the hardest time. It might even be the most self-denying work we do as believers. But it serves as a reflection of the greater forgiveness found in Jesus and the church is formed to display it.

Jesus invites his followers into a life of forgiveness... he sets the bar for us. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Likewise, the reminder comes here from Paul that forgiveness should be a rule of life for those in Christ. The church in Corinth has a prime opportunity to live it out and we gain from their lesson.

Forgive to stand firm in your faith.

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Here we are walking through a letter full of significance for the church - written to the body of Christ that was in Corinth, the gateway to Greece, a hub of culture. It comes to a church in need of reminder, correction, and guidance toward their true identity in Christ and what life looks like in response to his grace.

“Paul learned from Timothy’s visit to Corinth that there were troubles in the church, Paul paid the Corinthians an unscheduled visit, presuming that he would quickly fix things and be on his way. To his surprise, he was opposed to his face. Apparently a leader of the Corinthian church publically assailed Paul while the church passively observed (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:11). The attacker evidently had come under the sway of Paul’s opponents who had recently come to Corinth. As to the nature of the insults, we surmise that they had to do with Paul’s integrity - namely, that he was dishonest and double-minded and lacking in courage. Also it

was likely charged or insinuated that he was appropriating the collection for the poor in Jerusalem for his own needs. Moreover, all this was probably laced with personal comments about his ministerial effectiveness. In any event the humiliating surprise attack, coupled with a lack of support by the church, had so taken Paul aback that he elected to leave Corinth for a time.” Hughes

This necessitated the “severe” or harsh letter that Paul wrote. And that letter shook the church. Motivating action - certainly church discipline against the offending brother - and a resolve to set things right and here is Paul’s shepherding of the church.

This is what we discover: In the wake of sin, forgiveness if an act of obedience and spiritual warfare.

1) Sin is Painful

“Now if anyone has caused pain... he has caused it to all of you.”

Sin has consequences - even those “sins” we feel passionate about - the guy thought he was right in calling Paul out.

There is individual pain... this we are familiar with. When we violate what we are called to, disregarding Christ and others. This is where us grace junkies can get weird. Because forgiveness is so readily available in Jesus we neglect the consequences of sin, the reparation or restoration needed even for the things we are forgiven of. But in the ramifications of my sin, life falters, there is grief, maybe some level of loss and pain.

But we are so wrapped up in self, that we miss the pain our sin causes others.

And when you are committed to other believers, no person an island to themselves, the pain can be experienced corporately. This is where the consequences of our sin are felt by the church. Even Paul points back to the corporate pain - he says he is not pained but the body is.

This is exactly what the biblical church is meant for. To get messy. To get gracious. And to grow together.

“For Paul, the church was central to Christian existence. He never conceived of Christians living apart from the visible church. Rather, Christians lived in such a profound relationship that the pain of one was truly felt by all.” Hughes

Usually when I do membership seminars people get nervous when I talk about membership in the local as a covenant relationship on par with marriage. No one has set me straight from Scripture yet so I will keep saying it. When we are given faith in Christ we are also given a family to be part of. Now Christians have done some silly things and given us unlimited options for preference, but when we are part of the church, we don't just give up on it on a whim.

We find the people we want to sin with and we get on with it! Now I am not advocating sinning, but let's be honest, you will. And the body is there to help you see it, repent of it and grow from it.

“The corporate nature of Christianity comes out clearly in the passage. Paul's words are addressed not only to individuals, but also to the church whose members minister to one another by their gifts. Lively and open relationships provide the best context for the word of God to work out its purposes among us. This is why the local congregation is so highly regarded and referred to as ‘the church of God’ (1.1).” PB

And occasionally, the pain is significant enough that it necessitates church discipline. Just preceding Jesus' parable of the indebted servant, he gives us the model.

Matthew 18:15–17 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. [16] But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. [17] If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (ESV)

Calling each other to repentance. The process isn't easy but it is part of our growth. Truth is churches don't do it much. Because when we do, people just bail. No maturing, no restoration.

“If one is sorrowful, a blight is cast over them all. However, if one is allowed licence to go on sinning without restraint, the whole community is pulled down into the mud. Holding these two together requires a Christian community to think in terms of an ongoing story rather than a snapshot moment: it may be necessary first to confront and discipline a persistent sinner, and then to deal with the sorrow that results.” N.T. Wright

But in Corinth it worked as intended, the man repented, his sorrow brought him low revealing his sin. In response to Paul's appeals the church engage in extremely severe discipline, so severe that Paul now sees he needs to take them on to the next stage, that of reconciliation and forgiveness.

2) Forgiveness as Obedience

It is rooted in Christ's call to us - and in his Word. Even in the way he teaches us to pray, forgiveness towards others is front and center. Forgiveness is the appropriate response to the grace of Christ we have received.

“The church is loath to exercise church discipline against an unrepentant sinner. And then when it finally steps up to its responsibility and does it, it finds it difficult to forgive and restore the repentant sinner.” Hughes

It's hard. As I was studying this week I had to face my own reluctance toward forgiveness. Recently someone did something that I felt was hurtful. I don't even think the person understood that. In my recounting what happened I found myself saying “they can't take that back.” It is stain on their record and can they ever be trusted? Then I turn to 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 and the Spirit leads me to forgive and forget and repent of my unforgiveness.

“You should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”

“Paul did not merely beg the Corinthians to forgive the sinner - he viewed it as a matter of obedience. Obedience to God’s word demands doing the hard work of church discipline, and then the hard work of forgiving.” Hughes

Paul has forgiven him, for the church’s sake in the presence of Christ. Literally, before the face of Christ. So the church is invited to do the same.

This is so counter-cultural. We are living in a moment when we are more likely to cancel someone than to forgive them. Just share an unpopular opinion and plenty of people will line up to “boycott” you. But it’s not just on social media... It’s in the church.

Living before the face of Christ, forgiveness is the way. And it is actually healthy. “Forgiveness is a two-way street: by releasing the other person from guilt, you release yourself from being crippled by their actions.” N.T. Wright

If we are unwilling to forgive, we are wandering into the realm of disobedience and need of repentance ourselves. And when the church, looking to keep things “peaceful” tones down the definite notes of gospel belief and behavior for the sake of it, we jeopardize our effectiveness, our witness and mission to the world. But in obedience to Jesus, forgiveness becomes a way God makes his appeal through the church.

Show you are standing firm in what is true of Christ by forgiving one another. It brings the beauty of restoration. They will know you by your love for one another... a love that forgives.

So forgiveness is an act of obedience, but it is also significantly spiritual.

3) Forgiveness as Spiritual Warfare

We mostly think of Spiritual Warfare as happening in a prayer meeting, or alone in our prayer closets, waging battle with words and pleas. It is that, but it is also accomplished in our obedience to Christ.

Forgive, before the face of Christ, “so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.”

Here we encounter the cosmic accuser. The one who condemns, who attempts to instill doubt, and loves it when you find offense in every situation. He longs for tensions in the church. For grudges.

And taking offense comes easy to us... almost as if we prefer to see ourselves as victims where there is no crime so we can hold it against people. “Nursing a grudge is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.” - Anne Lamott

And this is the goal for Satan. To add contempt and conflict so those meant to be “saints together” are driven apart.

But, Paul says, we know his schemes, what he is up to and forgiveness takes him out at the knees.

“Satan, who is ever ready to destroy churches, will, in the absence of love and forgiveness, quickly bring bitterness and division. Now that the man has turned from his evil ways it is important that he, and the group who support him, be reconciled through forgiveness with the main body of the congregation.” PB

When the church let's unforgiveness and bitterness fester, it acts as a disease tainting everything in the body. Refusal to forgive can act as a poison in the church that eventually could kill it. But forgiveness, humility, and love wreck the evil one's plans. This is what the Spirit empowers the church for. This is the frontline of spiritual warfare. And it is for the joy of the body. No one likes to be sick... we want to have energy, strength, vitality, and in the church forgiveness is the way.

So sin is painful, we get that. Forgiveness then in response is obedience to Jesus. We understand that. And it is even spiritual warfare.

Even so we can feel unequipped for the task... and that is why Jesus moves first.

The very maker of the universe takes on flesh, enters into his creation so that he could provide forgiveness. And Jesus proves that forgiveness is not easy, it is costly.

In order to secure a relationship with people who disregarded him, who mock him, who refuse him... he gives up himself. A body broken, beaten, hung on a cross. The perfect sacrifice, covering all of our sin. Taking on our guilt, becoming sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God.

This is where salvation is sourced for us. This is the way out of a life of idolatry, out of the sinking feeling that we are not enough, out of the shame, the hopelessness. At the cross of Christ we hear “it is finished.” Forgiveness worked and granted to all who believe in Jesus.

Our forgiveness comes first and that is so astounding we should rejoice at the opportunities to extend it to others. Those that are forgiven much love much... and forgive others.

“By invoking the lordship of Christ, Paul also focuses our hearts on Christ as the one who not only demands that we forgive but empowers us to do so. You have been liberated to do so. And any honest attempt to bow to Christ in this will be met with the high voltage of unremitting grace.” Hughes

It is from this grace that we live.

Ephesians 4:30–32 “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. [31] Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. [32] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (ESV)

Colossians 3:12–14 “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, [13] bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. [14] And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (ESV)

Forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in the name of Jesus... and the church lives not only for this proclamation but this example. The body living to remind each other of the forgiveness we have in Jesus and our call to forgive one another.

And Jesus will likely give us opportunities to live it out! Maybe you even have something in mind right now!

Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, recounts a postwar encounter with a former prison guard from Ravensbruck concentration camp where her sister had died and she suffered greatly:

“I was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former SS man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there - the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blانched face.

“He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “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 so often to the people in Bloemendaal 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 of 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 things 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.”

Oh that we too would have this experience of grace and power before the face of Christ.

Forgive to stand firm.

Receive the forgiveness of Jesus - No one is too far. No sin is too great. All are welcome at the foot of the cross. Believe in Jesus and hear his “yes” over you, that you are forgiven and called to life in him.

Trust Him as you forgive others - Surrender your offense, obediently extend forgiveness to those that are repentant and maybe even to those that don't know how to be yet. Trust that Jesus has purpose in it and will be glorified by it.

Rejoice in the restoration - Here the church is made whole. And we should celebrate when brothers and sisters are reconciled, that we are revealing the grace of Christ to a watching world.

May we not miss the opportunities to freshly experience the forgiveness of Jesus and extend the same to others. May it be an essential part of Reservoir church as we commit to one another for the glory of God.