

“Strange Ideas”
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
08.01.21

Introduction

Forgiveness is a strange idea. People hurt us, offend, us, and betray us—and we’re just supposed to let it go, extend grace, and wish them well? The truth is that we aren’t naturally wired to do that. We are wired to survive.

We talk about the “survival of the fittest,” but that does not simply apply to our physical wellbeing. We are wired to survive emotionally as well.

We are wired to conquer, to get even, and to have the last word. And if we’re honest there is something psychologically satisfying about holding on to our anger. I think it gives us a false sense of power over our offender.

For this reason, forgiveness was not a virtue in the ancient world until Jesus came around. Then Jesus introduced us to all kinds of strange ideas. Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies, pray for them, and bless them.

But Jesus did not simply teach by precept, he also taught by example. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus was bullied by the religious leaders of his day in ways that most of cannot begin to imagine. When they finally handed him over to be executed by the Roman Government, Jesus was suspended in the air on a cross, and he looked up into the heavens saying, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Digging Deeper

Thirty some odd years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the idea of forgiveness was so deeply rooted in the Christian movement that Paul was explaining the concept to a group of Gentiles who lived in Asia Minor. The Ephesians were new Christians, and most of them came from a pagan background before following Christ. Paul knew that the idea of forgiveness would be completely unfamiliar to them, so he had to find a way to explain it to them.

The problem is that the concept of forgiveness does not really make sense. After all, you don’t deserve my forgiveness, and I don’t deserve your forgiveness. From a mere human perspective, why should we give someone a free pass?

So, Paul roots his argument in the origins of forgiveness. For Paul, forgiveness begins with God. He says, “Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God has forgiven you in Jesus Christ” (v. 32).

In other words, Paul introduces this strange idea of forgiveness by pointing out how strange it is that God has forgiven us. We are all rebels who prefer to live our own way apart from God. As Paul says elsewhere, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NRSV).

It is out of God’s great love that we are forgiven. Not because we deserve it or that we could ever earn forgiveness. Therefore, if an infinite God can forgive us of our trespasses against him, then what excuse do we have to withhold forgiveness from one another?

Therefore, Paul takes it one step further in the very next verse when he says, “Therefore, be imitators of God...” In other words, when we forgive one another something much, much bigger is happening than we might realize. When we forgive one another, we are witnessing to the forgiveness that God has shown to us. We are allowing the love, and grace, and mercy that God has shown us to be extended to others, and by forgiving others, we are giving them a picture of a forgiving God.

Theological Reflection

Perhaps some of us take for granted that forgiveness is a strange idea. If you’ve grown up in church, most likely you know that forgiving one another is a fundamental Christian value.

But as C.S. Lewis says in his book *Mere Christianity*, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive...”¹ In other words, forgiveness might be something that we value in theory, but it is typically something we struggle with putting into practice.

I realize that I am address a variety of people who have had variety of different experiences. Perhaps some of you have been hurt in ways that I cannot imagine. It would be insensitive of me to say, “Get over it—this is what the Bible says.” After all, I have my own struggles from time-to-time with letting go and extending grace.

Maybe forgiveness isn’t one giant step we take all at once. Perhaps it begins by simply praying that God will help us forgive, realizing that letting go of certain pain and anger might take a lifetime. Realistically, it will look differently for all of us.

But as someone once said, “He who is unwilling to forgive breaks the bridge over which he too must pass.” In other words, forgiveness is a two-way street. We should be open to forgive others because at some point in time we will need others to extend the same grace to us. Not because we deserve their forgiveness or because they deserve ours, but because of God’s great love that makes it possible for us to do such strange things.

¹ Lewis, C.S., *The C.S. Lewis Signature Classics: Mere Christianity*, p. 98.

What will it look like for us as the Church of Jesus Christ to live out this strange idea of forgiveness? What will it look like for us to be imitators of God?

Reference Tools

Hawthorne, G., Martin, Ralph, Reid, Daniel. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. 1993. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Lewis, C.S. *The C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. 2017. New York: Harper One.

Snodgrass, Klyne. *Ephesians Commentary*. 1996. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your typical response to conflict? Fight or flight?
2. How does the idea of forgiving others in the same way that God has forgiven us impact your understanding of forgiveness?
3. How does Jesus' example both challenge you and inspire you to forgive those who have wronged you?
4. When you think about the people or person you need to forgive, what practical steps come to mind?
5. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?
6. How can we pray for you?