

...Christ the King Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, your sister congregation there, and just tell you that I'm delighted to be here. Any time I get invited for a celebration and I've missed all the hard work, that's a plus. And today, I understand, is a great time of celebration as you look forward to your new facility. God has provided for you, and we're rejoicing. I was telling Jim that we've only been doing setup for four years. At Christ the King we meet in a school cafeteria and we already are fighting the tendency to grumble. So you have set an example for us in perseverance and in faith and we just rejoice in God blessing you in this way. And delighted to be a sister congregation in our presbytery and to encourage one another in that way, and you're a great encouragement to us as you have been to me through the years.

I want to turn to our text now. Before we do, let's have a word of prayer.

Lord, as we come to this, in many ways a familiar passage of scripture, I pray that You would give us ears to hear. Give eyes to see, give us hearts to obey, Lord, for this is foreign to us in our old nature. Lord, we need Your transforming grace through the work of Jesus Christ, and send Your Holy Spirit in our midst, that you might anoint both the preacher and the hearer, that we might not only be hearers but doers of the Word. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

I'm going to read, from Colossians chapter 3, just two verses. We'll talk about the context a little but, beginning with verse 12, Colossians chapter 3: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, wholly and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 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." May God add his blessing to the reading of His Word.

If you have a family of, say, five people, you have a total in that family of fifteen relationships. I wasn't very good at math, but I learned the mathematical formula for calculating that. You take $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5$, and that adds up the total number of relationships. Now I didn't know how many folks would be here today, so I can't do that in my head either, but a while back I did that for our church just thinking in terms of about 130 at the time. Don't check my math, because like I said, I was a history major. But it added up to 18,431 relationships. Now what I wanted to submit to you today, that in your family, whether it's a family of two or a family of five or ten, and in your church family, every one of those relationships is made up of two sinners, both sinning against each other and being sinned against. And if you don't think that's true of your family, and your relationships, then we need to open God's Word together, because that's what our scripture teaches us. That we are born in sin, and as long as we're in this life, and even with a new nature, even having been forgiven, and even having come into faith in Jesus Christ and having been washed by his blood, being justified in God's sight through Him, we still remain... we still have remaining sin within us. And our hearts are divided and not pure. So therefore, this text today is really vital for us as families and as believers, as a family of believers. And I'm convinced, as being an elder for a few years and seeing my own heart, that we talk about this a lot, but we really don't practice it very well. So today may be an expensive lesson. I'm going to put that warning right up front for you. Today may cost you. As we open this text today, it's going to cost you and me. OK? So brace yourselves.

First of all, as we grow in our relationship to the Lord and in following Him as His Church, there are three ways that we're to grow in forgiving and becoming a forgiving people. First of all, Paul says that we're to put on Christ. We're to put off

pride and self-centeredness and put on Christ. Now, you have to read the context here – we don't have time today but, Paul has explained who Jesus is and what he has done. And he's told the church that we're like people that were dead and now made alive. OK? You've been resurrected in Christ. And because of that, you want to dress differently, you want to live differently. Your life has been given to you in Christ, you belong to Him. You have been, as he puts it, "God's chosen ones – holy and beloved by Him." So therefore, because we are now different people, we're going to want to... Paul's analogy is putting on clothing, putting off the old and that's an aorist tense. Once and for all, putting off, a constant putting off of the old ways and putting on the new way. Putting on the new life. The attributes – the clothing, as it were – the wardrobe of the believer. And he describes it with some wonderful words. What is that wardrobe? What are we to put on? Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. A sermon's in every one of those words. To sum it up, Paul's saying, as he does in Romans 12:3, that we're not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. OK? That's our new way of thinking. Philippians 2:3, similar, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." We are now as God's new creation in Christ, being in Christ, we are to think... we are to put ourselves below other people. Now we live in a world where that's the opposite way to think. You've got to get ahead. You've got to get on top. You've got to become famous. You've got to become a celebrity. You've got to be noticed. You've got to be praised. But Paul says that in Christ we have a new way of thinking, a new life within us that causes us, as God's people, to think in an opposite way, a counterintuitive way if you will, from the way the world thinks.

To put ourselves below others. And that's going to be hard for you all. Because I'm up here and I can see that you're a good looking group. You're a good looking group. People are going to compliment you, they're going to tell you what a great person you are and how hard you're working and how good your grades are. You're going to get a lot of good positive feedback. So it's going to be hard for us. It's going to be hard for you more than me, probably, to have that attitude that others are more important than me. But that's exactly what Paul says is the DNA of a Christian. It's the DNA of the new life in Christ. To begin to think that way - that we are sinners amongst other sinners. You know the thing that we forget so easily in all those 18,000 relationships or more is that when other people sin against us that we're a sinner too. Oh, we're really good at seeing and pointing out and diagramming and dissecting other people's sins against us. We forget so easily that we too are sinners being sinned against, and our biggest problem is not what they have done or might have done. Our biggest problem will always be our own reaction, because we tend to have a sinful reaction, because we put ourselves as more important. But this new way of thinking will solve a lot of issues. It eliminates a lot of friction and a lot of that goes on in the church, let's be honest. I'm a pastor and an elder and I get to hear about it. People come to me - I notice it - there are perceived slights, there are real slights, the beginning of estrangement, "Why does that person always do that? Why do they treat me...? Wait a minute, I'm the sub-chairmen of the committee of the sub-committee of whatever and they don't recognize my authority. They just went out and did it their own way." There are just a million things going on as we interact with one another in God's loving design. In His plan for sanctification in our lives He puts us together so that can happen and

will happen and yet we're surprised by it and we begin to distance ourselves from one another.

The second thing, though, that Paul tells us we're to do in verse 13 is to bear with one another – to bear with one another. The apostle John, when he was in his late years, it is said that he really lost the ability to preach and teach and he would sit in his chair and greet those that came to talk to him and he would say over and over again, "Little children, love one another." No matter what problem you brought to him or what question that's what he said, "Little children, love one another." You see that reflected in the epistles of John, don't you, "Little children, love one another." You know what really helps me? If I see myself and you all and the Christians that God puts me together to work with as little children. We are little children, aren't we? We're just beginning in God's grace. We're just getting started. You know if we would begin to see each other, I challenge you to see your elders that way. Your deacons, your parents. We need to see each other as little children in God's eyes. Because you know... I'm almost afraid to say this because it could get used against me or used the wrong way, but... if I go up and... well, this could happen... if I knock over the communion tray today, I'm sure you all will forgive me but you all will think, "That was pretty klutzy." But if a three-year-old child just gets up and runs and bumps into the table and it spills, you all will gather him up in your arms and... but there's more grace and more understanding because he's a little child, right? That's the way Paul's saying we're to think of each other, we're to bear with one another. It takes patience to be a parent, doesn't it? It takes patience to raise children. Well that's what we're doing in the church. We're bearing with one another. What a great thing if many of the things that happen to us don't rise to the level of a sin against us, or a serious sin. That we should just be

able to bear with. But instead, we're prickly people, we're irritable people, we tend to grumble and gossip and complain because we haven't learned to love each other as children in God's family. And it's easier to bear those frustrations and irritations for those who are dear to Christ and to us.

Spurgeon has a wonderful quote - I'm going to read it to you because it is so good. He said:

I wish brothers and sisters that we could all imitate the pearl oyster. A hurtful particle intrudes itself into its shell, and this vexes it and grieves it. It cannot reject the evil but what does it do but cover it with a precious substance extracted out of its own life by which it turns the intruder into a pearl. Oh that we could do that with the provocations that we receive from our fellow Christians, so that pearls of patience, gentleness, and forgiveness might be bred within us by that which otherwise would have harmed us.

Isn't that a wonderful picture of what is going on in your church, in your family, in your relationships. God's bringing those irritating things by his sovereign design into our life. And we need to see those in God's perspective.

Thirdly, God wants us always to be forgiving one another. As you move to your next facility and enter a new chapter of the church, I want to encourage you that a forgiving community is a very attractive and wonderful community to the world around us. They've never seen it. They've never experienced it. They don't know what it's like.

I'll tell you a brief story about years ago when I was in college. We started a college fellowship to try to reach other students on our campus and we started having

meetings every, I think it was Monday nights, and we'd invite the best speakers we could get and we'd try to recruit students to come and hear various preachers and teachers. And it was going pretty well but on my hall there was one guy named John - there's one on every hall when you go to college - and he was the hallway atheist, maybe there was more than one. But John was very resistant to any interest in Christianity. We invited him to come, week in and week out, and he never came. I mean a year and a half went by and he would never come. He never wanted to talk, he only wanted to argue. Well, one day we'd put posters up about our meeting for the next Monday night, and John came to me, and he said, "What time is your meeting on Monday night?" And I said, "Seven-thirty." And he said, "Good, because I want to be there." I almost collapsed to the floor. And as he turned to leave I said, "John, what happened? Why the change?" We had had all the great snazzy speakers, all the slick preachers you could get. All the witty people, all the good joke tellers, he'd never been interested. He said "I want..." He turned around and he pointed his finger at me and he said, "I want to come tonight." Now, I need to tell you something before I go there. We had invited, on that Monday night, an eighty-year-old woman to speak to our college fellowship. Her name was Corrie Ten-Boom. And John said to me, "I want to hear what that lady has to say because she has faced real evil, and has forgiven." That's the final apologetic, isn't it? That's the thing that the world has no answer to.

Corrie came that night and she spoke to us and she told the story of how she and her sister Betsy had been in prison in Ravensbrück camp during World War II by the Nazis for hiding Jews in their father's house. And her father was also in prison and Betsy and her father died in concentration camps. And she told the story about how in 1947 she spoke at a meeting and after the meeting where she had presented the

gospel she saw in the line of people that were coming to shake her hand and greet her, she saw the face of the cruelest Nazi guard in the prison camp where she and Betsy had been interred. The one who had been the most cruel and the most hateful to her and her sister. She saw him coming toward her and she said that she was reluctant to forgive him and she prayed that she'd be able to. And then she wrote that God gave her grace to be able to forgive. And then as that man came forward and grabbed her hand that:

...for a long moment we grasped each other's hand, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

See, the world that we live in is not so much interested in forgiveness, because we have a culture that has no definition of sin. Some think that there is no god and there will be no accounting and that all they need to do is to find a way to feel good about what they're doing. They are left with guilt feelings that they don't know what to do with and they come up with a formula that says the most important thing is that you have to forgive yourself. Because they have lost the biblical concept of forgiveness, or another false belief out there is that god is not a god of justice and righteous judgment but he's all just about love and that he'll grade on the curve. As Heinrich Heine, the philosopher, said, "God will forgive me. That's his job." You know, when we come to the grace of God we can have two extreme reactions. We can say, "I'm so good I don't really need it." Or we can say, "I'm so bad I don't qualify." That's the extremes of the human heart and each one is a sinful deceitful way of thinking, because the whole Bible is the story of God's redemption and his forgiveness. Look back at Colossians 2:13, one chapter back, same verse number. "As you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him having forgiven us

all our trespasses by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

I get to go to the jail in Roanoke County once a month and share the gospel with the guys there - and this is a favorite verse - and I tell them, “Think of it this way, your arrest warrant, the warrant for your arrest, the thing that has written down on it all the violations of the law that you have committed, that is nailed to the cross.” And they begin to smile thinking what a wonderful thing that would be. Of course they still face man’s justice, but this is offered. And you know what you may react to is, “Well, I’m not a prisoner. I’m not so much in need of that forgiveness.” That’s the dangerous thing for believers, isn’t it? To come to that place where we say, “I was forgiven, now I don’t need it so much anymore.”

Let me ask you this question: if I could open a book this morning, or turn on a tape player and play back, publicly, every word you spoke in the last month, how would you feel? How many would want that? Right now, play it back. We need grace. We need God’s forgiveness, don’t we? We too are sinners but we’re blind to our own sin. Yet another word for the gospel is forgiveness. Luke 24:47 says, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” This is what the gospel is - the message of forgiveness of sins. How are we to forgive? Let’s just close with some specific ways, four ways in which we are to forgive. Notice, first of all, Paul’s emphasis here in verse 13 - “...if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” The word “forgiveness” or “forgive” or “forgiving”, three times in one short little sentence. That’s how important it is. Just that the Lord has forgiven you. How has the Lord forgiven us? First of all, He sought you and me out. He came to us who were His enemies and He rescued us and He

forgave us. So we're to be, first of all, a seeking people - a seeking people. You know, this is the costly part. Remember these two verses: Matt 5:23, "Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother then come and offer your gift." Go! Seek! Find! We'd have a lot less counseling in the church if we remembered that one. The second text, Matt 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." So there you get it. If you've sinned against someone, what's your job? What's the first thing you're to do? Worship? No. Go! If someone has sinned against you what's the first thing you're to do? Go! Seek them out! Should be a head-on collision at some place, right? That would be a wonderful thing, if you met each other in the hallway or on the street pass each other and recognize, "Wait, he's coming to my house." Or you get a busy signal. You're both on the phone, call waiting, calling each other. That's the way it should work. That's the way it should work here at Eagle Heights. Forgiveness should be brought to you. Forgiveness should be taken to other people. You know what I wish at Christ the King is sometimes we as elders have to go visit folks who, let me put it this way, folks who probably don't want us to come visit. And that's a sad thing in itself. But something's happened. Some relationship's gotten broken. Maybe someone's not been coming to worship any longer. And it's my job and the other elders' job to go. I wish we had the kind of church that they would know that when we come that forgiveness is in their driveway. I wish they just knew that. I wish we all... when that person that has hurt you before and you hurt them and you get together - instead of assuming the worst, assume the best, that God is going to work through

that and there's going to be reconciliation and forgiveness. It's going to cost us. It's going to cost you. Christ paid His life on a cruel cross. He paid the price. To not forgive is to demand another price to be paid. To not forgive our brothers and sisters in Christ is to say, "Jesus' death was not enough, I want something more." There's got to be greater price paid to me! Deposit to my account, and I just want you to think - if that wells up in your heart - of yourself standing over the abyss of God's judgment and wrath and looking down, because that's what we're doing when we withhold, and we demand payment from someone else.

Our forgiveness is to be an abundant forgiveness. How did Jesus forgive us? He told Peter. Peter asked, "Well, how many times do we forgive?" Seventy times seven - even more than that. Jesus on the cross said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Stephen, as he's being stoned, said, "Lord do not hold this against them." That is an abundant forgiveness. It's a complete forgiveness. It's a rich forgiveness. Let me just say here, a word of caution, that forgiveness does not mean immediately entrusting to someone or to that person again, nor does it mean that people can continuously abuse you by demanding that you allow them more opportunities to do that. Forgiveness is two things. It's an attitude. It's a desire - an attitude of desire. That's first of all what has to be in your heart: an attitude of forgiveness, an attitude of "I want reconciliation, I have not laid this against their account, I've forgiven in my heart."

But there's another part of forgiveness that's a transaction. And some of the time that transaction will not occur soon and maybe never at all, but that doesn't change our Lord's command that we have the attitude and the desire and the motivation to forgive. The transaction is when someone repents and they say, "I have sinned against you. Please forgive me." And they own specifically what they did. Then you

get the chance to say, "I forgive you." That's the transaction of forgiveness.

Forgiveness doesn't come when you apologize. Someone has said, you know if you bump into each other in line and I spill your coffee then I should apologize, because that was a mistake. It was a fumbling error. You apologize for those things. But when you sin against someone you ask for forgiveness. I want to ask you right now, when was the last time you asked someone for forgiveness. Specifically said, "I have sinned against you by doing [fill in the blank]. Please forgive me." When was the last time that happened in your marriage? That transaction? When was the last time that happened between brothers and sisters? Brother and brother, sister, siblings within the family? When was the last time you did that? When was the last time that happened here at the church? It should be part of our DNA, the clothes that we put on. To be putting on Christ is to be forgiving one another, constantly ongoing day by day it should be a normal occurrence and when people come into our midst they should say, "Wow, these people do get along, they do love each other. How do they keep that up?" And they figure it out because they'll see us forgiving one another. They'll see us confessing sin they'll hear those words and they'll see those prayers of reconciliation being made and they'll realize, "Hey, this is just the normal thing that happens around here. This goes on all the time around these people. That may be the secret of how they get along and how they love each other and how they work together for the Lord and how they have this great community of joy, because they are experiencing and they are granting to one another that grace of forgiveness." But it doesn't happen without that transaction. You know, a lot of times what happens is that we rebuff it and one person starts out to say, "Well I apologize that you're so irritable or that I made you get angry." Wait a minute, what happened there? You just put the guilt on somebody else, right?

You didn't say, "I apologize for being selfish. And doing what I wanted or saying those words that hurt you." It's a covenant promise, forgiveness is. It's a promise not to bring it up again. When you say, "I forgive you," you're making a covenant promise not to bring it up or to use it against them ever again. You're laying down that right. Just as our Father in heaven forgave us who said, Hebrews 8:12, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Now, God doesn't forget in the sense that He no longer knows the fact that we sinned. He certainly does not do that, but He does promise never to use it, never to hold it against us again, because it has been paid for by Jesus Christ. And you know the story in Matthew 18 of the unforgiving servant - the one who bumbled his... and corruptly lost his master's money which he was steward for, and the latest estimate that I got that was somewhere around \$37 million dollars in equivalent to today that he lost and that he owed and couldn't possibly repay. And his master came and forgave his \$37 million debt written off, paid in full, you're done. You know the rest of the story. His buddy, his fellow servant came along and said, "Where's that \$100 that you owe me?" That's the economic comparison. And he beats him and throws him into prison because he won't pay him back the \$100. And you and I are that servant that got forgiven \$37 million, an astronomical sum, an unpayable sum. That's Jesus' point there. We're always that person. In every situation we're that person. We're THAT servant. And therefore, we can never withhold forgiveness for someone else. But it will cost us, but it's \$100 compared to \$37 million. It will cost you to say, "I don't lay that charge against you. You don't have to pay me back or prove or make it up to me in any way. That comes with a cost. And you may be holding that back right now in your heart against someone and I want to encourage you to see yourself as Jesus calls you - it would be a wonderful thing now as we

come to the Lord's table, maybe while we sing if you have to go to somebody, and maybe they have to go to you, and you can just meet in the aisle or you can go around the corner and you can forgive one another. Because that's as long as it needs to last. That would be a wonderful thing if that was a common thing that we always did. It might be a brother or sister. It might be your parents, or it might be your spouse that you need to ask forgiveness and grant it. That's what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, that's what it means to be His Church, that's what it means to be a forgiving people. We're invited now to a meal. We're invited to a meal with one loaf. Let's pray.

Lord we thank you that we have been forgiven in Christ. And we pray that you would make us a forgiving people. It wouldn't be something that we'd hold up as a concept, but be a practice in our lives, our families, our church family, our presbytery. That we would forgive as you have forgiven us. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.