

Ephesians 4:30-32 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, “I can’t forgive you, and I never will!” — said one very hurt Christian to another. Forgiveness is a word we use often to describe our faith and its blessings. And yet, forgiveness is not always an easy thing to grasp. When you think about it, you might wonder, Is forgiveness solely theological — just between us and God, or is it practical — between us and each other? And when we think about it in terms of the questions, “Why would God forgive me?” or “Why should I forgive others?” it can be seen as both, which only adds to the confusion and lack of understanding about receiving and granting forgiveness.

Today Paul leads us to look at forgiveness in a very practical way — as something that has to do with our everyday lives as Christians. And as we were reminded with the opening line of this sermon, forgiveness can be a difficult thing, not just to grasp, but to carry out. At times, given the sinful circumstance we may find ourselves in, it can seem impossible. But Paul reminds us of two very important truths to remember. A forgiving heart, he says, is filled with the Holy Spirit and motivated by Christ.

We can never forget how important the work of the Holy Spirit is. Paul said, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” Why not? Look at all that he does! It is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity, who called us out of the darkness of unbelief to faith. Through the Gospel, he gives us the forgiveness won by Jesus on the cross, as he calls us to faith.

And it is the Holy Spirit who continues to work in our hearts through Word and Sacrament to keep us in the faith. Because not only can we not get faith, or forgiveness, or any of Christ’s blessings on our own, neither can we hold on to them, once he has made them ours.

And, again, it is the Holy Spirit who moves us to show our love to God and our neighbor. He moves us to produce fruits of our faith which fill the Christian’s life. And one of those fruits of faith that fills our lives is a forgiving heart. Think about that: Since it is only through the work of the Holy Spirit that we can claim our forgiveness in Jesus, it naturally follows that it is only through him that we can show forgiveness.

And then, that forgiven and forgiving heart is moved by the Holy Spirit to shun the world’s ways. As Paul encourages here, “**Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.**”

It’s worth the time to look closely at the progression here. **Bitterness** — hard feelings of resentment toward others. **Rage and Anger** — Harsh indignation which brings bitterness out into the open. **Brawling** — anger showing itself in an eagerness to pick a fight. **Slander** — Those hurtful, dangerous, biting words against God and our neighbor. And **Malice** — all kinds of mean-spirited hatred which sinful hearts spew forth.

Get rid of all these, Paul says. They don’t come from a heart filled with the Holy Spirit. Again he says that by these unforgiving sinful attitudes that lead to sinful actions we *grieve* the Holy Spirit. They go directly against his saving work in our hearts, and his work in the hearts of others. And that saddens him.

And we’re all guilty. “Get rid of this,” Paul says. Not, “don’t *do* this.” In a world filled with bitterness, anger, brawling, slander, malice, we’d like to say, nope, not me. But of course, we can’t say that, can we?

Our hearts often boil with these kinds of attitudes — the boil over into actions. The devil, the world, our sinful flesh stir up the pot of our sinful hearts on a daily basis and out comes all sorts of stuff - the stuff Paul mentions here.

The Holy Spirit is the only one who can turn down the heat for us. He is the one who empowers our new nature, our faith, to put a lid on that pot. He brings forth the fruits of that forgiven heart he created when, as Paul says, here, “We were “**sealed for the day of redemption**” at our baptisms.

How impossible that can seem at times — to lovingly cool down, to let the fruits of that forgiving heart come forth and grow. And Paul knew that. That’s why he sounds this warning. At the same time though, he reminds us to whom the Holy Spirit points us for help in our struggle.

He said, “**Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**” The forgiving heart is a changed heart. It is kind and compassionate, motivated by God’s love to

us in Christ. Our changed hearts do not grieve the Holy Spirit, but are produced and promoted by him. Look again at that other list — Bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, malice. What a contrast to what the Holy Spirit brings forth from the heart of faith.

And for our example and motivation to be kind and compassionate, Paul points to Jesus. **Forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.** To understand what that means we need look no further than to our own forgiveness. We talk about it so often, perhaps at times we miss the point.

We have done nothing to deserve God's forgiveness — yet we have it! We have not earned it, we should not have it — yet it is ours! It belongs to him, but he gives it only one way — as a free gift.

This is all true because he was the one who secured it for us. All this is ours because God did all that was necessary for us to have it. *God's Son* lived, died, rose — *We* are forgiven — *God* says so! **God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and for the sins of the whole world.** No strings attached. No further payment needed. Forgiveness full and free. We know this forgiveness is ours, because the Holy Spirit has led us to believe it, and receive it.

Now, Paul says, “Forgive like that. Forgive as you have been forgiven.” We might be tempted to think that a person simply does not deserve our forgiveness. Or maybe that a person has done nothing to earn our forgiveness. And so we may hold a grudge, perhaps even take revenge. And that's when we need to remember these words. **“Forgive, just as in Christ God for gave you.”**

How can we do any less? How can we refuse to do so? How could we think to replace forgiveness with bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, or malice? We can't! Not when we remember and are moved by our Lord's forgiveness of all our sins.

And remember Peter's question of Jesus? How many times must I forgive? up to 7 times? And we know Jesus' answer — not 7 times but 77 times! Every time. Impossible we say. It can't be done.

And yet we've seen here today, that it can. It can when a heart is moved by the Holy Spirit to forgive as God forgives. we can forgive when we focus on the precious gift of forgiveness God has given us, and when we realize that my forgiving others is simply sharing what God has given me.

I give away technically what isn't even mine — God's forgiving love. Others may not deserve it — neither do I! Others may not appreciate it — at times, neither do I! It may not be easy, but who said it would be? And when the devil, the world, and our sinful nature start to stir the pot, we need only to remember Paul's encouragement. **I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.**

When we focus on Christ and all he's done for us, there we find the strength to face the trials and troubles of life in a sinful world. There we find the strength that keeps us from being overcome by Satan's lies. There we find the strength that helps us remember what we learn in his Word about forgiveness. There we find even the strength to forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

A forgiving heart — It's God's special gift to his people. It comes from a heart full of the Holy Spirit, given to us through regular use of his Word and Sacraments. What on our own may seem to be an impossible task, to forgive, even when inwardly our sinful flesh is crying out, “Never - I'll never forgive you!” God makes it possible. He makes it possible through his Word and promises. He fills us with his Holy Spirit. He motivates us through his promises to us through Christ. May God grant us each a rich measure of his Spirit, that we may daily, and readily be willing to share his forgiving love from our forgiving hearts, filled with the Holy Spirit, motivated by Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.