

Christian Living, from Colossians #4

Paul gave instructions to the Colossian believers in practical Christian living. So far we have studied Col. 3:1-12.

Col. 3:13 – “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

Forbearance

Literally this means to bear with each other, or endure together. We are yoked together with others in the church and our families in a common purpose. These yokes are not always equal, in age, strength, enthusiasm, maturity, etc., and yet we are not to let such differences hinder our working together. The OT law forbade the yoking of an ox and ass together, apparently because it is a grossly unequal match of strength. So we are not to be yoked together with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14). But there are rarely perfect matches – one ox may be stronger than another. So in marriage, man and woman are very unequal in size, strength, and emotions. Either one may be greater in intellect or some specific ability, yet no one of these is what it means to avoid an unequal yoke. In fact those differences should make the two together greater than separate (“synergy” – the whole is greater than the sum of the parts). An unequal yoke refers primarily to the fleshly vs. the spiritual nature. Two people can differ in spiritual maturity or even to some extent doctrinal correctness, but still be effectively working together (Phl. 1:27 – “... ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel”). But to willingly marry, or enter into a business partnership with an unbeliever is to be unequally yoked. A believer should not marry an unbeliever.

This brings up the obvious question of what to do if a believer is married to an unbeliever. The Bible makes it quite plain that as long as the unbelieving partner is content to remain in marriage, the believer is not to divorce, but to pray for and to influence the unbelieving one so that they will in turn be saved. In fact it is usually the case for two married unbelievers that one will be saved before the other. That doesn't make their marriage invalid. It may introduce some temporary disagreements or confusion, but the goal is for both spouses to be saved.

The concept of forbearance, or bearing with one another, also encompasses the common annoyances and irritations that arise between people, or even churches. E.g., “Well, that's not the way I would do it!” We all have our opinions on how things should and should not be done, and naturally think that our way is (obviously) the best. We should be willing to bear with one another and engage in some amount of give and take, especially in matters that are not essential to the faith. There are differing gifts in the church (1 Cor. 12:27-30), and “administrations”. Not every church administers itself the same, and yet within the limits of what is Biblically directed, can work together toward the same goal – the expansion and growth of God's kingdom.

Another aspect of forbearance is in our attitudes towards those who are “weak in the faith”, which is the topic of Rom. 14. We need to bear with others who are relatively new in the faith, or whose conscience forbids things that are not really sinful. If someone has just come to the faith, we tolerate some attitudes, actions, or words that we would not expect from that same person a few years down the road. We recognize that we are all “works in progress”.

Forgiveness (Col. 3:13 – “... forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”)

Unfortunately, things often move beyond just bearing with one another in disagreements, to quarreling or actual wrongdoing. People are often wronged, or at least think they have been wronged. Even if the slight or grievance is false, the feeling of being wronged can be as divisive as if it is actual. In every church and family from the days of Colossians (and before) till now, some people have been wronged by others, and so we need to know how to respond. The way of the natural man is anger, biting words, resentment, lawsuits, hatred, retaliation, or even physical violence. The situation often gets worse over time in a snowball effect. It becomes a root of bitterness that corrupts and poisons the soul. That root of bitterness is so strong that it can even survive the death of the offender. How many people still harbor resentments against a dead parent? Heb. 12:15 – “Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;”

The Christian response is to be forbearance and forgiveness, with Christ as our example. He suffered wrongly and did not retaliate. Even on the cross he said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” 1 P. 2:21-23 says “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps ...Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not: but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, he said “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” (Mt. 5:10-12).

Paul rebukes the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 6:1-8 for going to law against their brethren to resolve disputes. Verse 7 – “Now there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?” I believe he considered this to be a last resort, because earlier he said that such disputes should be a matter of arbitration by the church itself, and that it would be shameful to think they didn’t even have one member adequate to the task of judging between the disputing parties.

Jesus gave a detailed procedure for resolving personal disputes in the church, in Mt. 18:15-17.

1. Confront the person directly. State the offense and give them a chance to settle the matter privately.
2. If this doesn’t work, go to him again with one or two others.
3. If he still persists, take it to the whole church.
4. If he won’t even listen to the church, then he should be put out and treated, not with hate, but as an unbeliever.

Why this procedure?

- It keeps an unconfronted issue from festering and getting worse,
- It confirms that the offense is real, not imaginary. Some people imagine slights and offences that are not true. Getting other people involved will help show whether the fault is really his, or possibly your own.
- The fact that it can result in excommunication means that the offense is not petty, but quite serious. Many offences are not worth getting all het up about, and should just be ignored (that is where forbearance comes in).
- It allows the offender the dignity of privately acknowledging his wrong, making restitution if necessary, and avoiding it becoming a matter of open knowledge or gossip.
- It requires confirmation by multiple witnesses or investigators so that it does not become a matter of one person’s word against another. Dt. 19:15 – “One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.”
- It maintains the purity and good reputation of the church in the community, so they, or Christianity itself, should not be supposed to approve of such behavior.

Jesus says that forgiveness is crucial – our own forgiveness depends on our willingness to forgive others. Mk. 11:25-26 – “And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

Peter asked Jesus how often must he forgive a brother (seven times?). Jesus responded with the parable of the servant who was forgiven ten thousand talents (a vast fortune), but could not forgive a fellow servant the paltry amount of a hundred pence. Mt. 18:32-25 – “Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”

Unforgiveness can often result in serious mental and physical problems, or even criminal violence. If you search the internet for “physical effect of unforgiveness on the body”, you will see some very interesting articles by leading medical institutions like Johns Hopkins or the Mayo Clinic. According to one article, “Chronic anger ... results in numerous changes in heart rate, blood pressure and immune response. Those changes, then, increase the risk of depression, heart disease and diabetes, among other conditions. Forgiveness, however, calms stress levels, leading to improved health.”

(<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it>)

If even these people see the importance of forgiveness, how much more for us as Christians to forgive, when we have the added spiritual considerations, and the example of Christ?

Sunday school teaching notes are available at: <https://howardslackteachings.com>