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Elevate Others: Forgiveness

Colossians 3:13

Hello Chapel Hill family. It is great to be with you for worship today. We're in the middle of our sermon series, Elevate Others. In the last few weeks, we've looked at lifting up others by thinking of ourselves less, we talked about how we can come alongside others and carry their burdens. I know that you have been encouraged by this series like I have, because we keep hearing stories of Chapel Hill people elevating others in our community.

This morning, we are going to tackle a tough one. How do we elevate people in our lives who really don't deserve to be elevated? Sure, we can work on thinking of ourselves less. And certainly we should care more for those with heavy burdens. But what about the person who has done you wrong? The person who has betrayed you, or caused you harm, or the person who just irks you...are we really called to elevate them? Surely not! Right?

Well, the Bible calls us to something a little bit different. Let's take a look at our passage in Colossians 3. Paul has used the first two chapters of his letter to Colossians to argue that in Christ, we have the fullness of God AND the completeness of salvation found in him. Christ is supreme and his work is complete. And then he switches gears, If Christ is God, and if he died for our sins, how are we to live? The answer is a completely different life. We are to take off our old self like an ill-fitting, tattered garment, and instead put on the new self, our new set of clothes. We're given a list of what those clothes are adorned with, let's look at 3:12. **Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...**

This is the new self! Marked with compassion, kindness, humility...Spiritual fruit. This is the attitude we should walk in. And then we're given a picture of what these characteristics look like in action. Colossians 3:13 says:

...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.

SO there you have it. We're called to forgive each other. Case closed. Easy peasy... If only that were true! Let's take a quick anonymous poll. Wherever you are sitting right now, I want you to raise your hand if you've had someone in your life that you have struggled to forgive. I'd wager that we have a lot of hands raised right now.

Forgiveness is not easy! And when we look at this text, we find that the type of forgiveness we are called to is a tall order. First, Paul says to the Colossians that as Christians they are to bear with one another. Now this is different than the bearing of other's burdens that Pastor Mark talked about two weeks ago. The word here means put up with one another. Frankly, people are hard to live with. Even Christians! And before you start making a mental list of the people in the church that bug you, let me remind you that Paul says bear with EACH OTHER.

My grandma once told me about one of the biggest fights she and my grandpa ever had. She can't remember what set her off, what made her so angry at my grandpa, but she just laid into him. You do this, and you do that, and 10 years ago you did this, and you always, and you never... After several minutes of ranting, she needed to take a breath. And my grandpa reached across the table, and held her hand, and looked deep into her eyes, and said, "Marj, you're right. But you should know, you're no picnic yourself."

It's easy to look around and see the faults of others, but there are certainly moments where we're no picnic to live with either. And yet, we're called to bear with each other with those characteristics of the new self: with compassionate hearts, and kindness, humility, meekness, patience.

Now, this doesn't mean that we are to put up with bad behavior, quite the contrary. We are called to put to death the old self. And there are certainly times, as Paul says in Colossians 3:16 that we are to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom as we let the word of Christ dwell in us. But it does speak to how we are to interact with one another. Putting up with one another with kindness and patience.

And the apostle doubles down and takes it a step further, he says that if anyone has a complaint against another, the appropriate action is to forgive.

As many of you know, I just finished seminary, in fact my graduation was supposed to be this weekend. Like all good recent seminary grads, I really nerded out on the original language here. The word used for complaint means a legitimate claim against another person, like a debt owed, or a personal error or transgression. And it is only used once in the New Testament, right here. But here is what is super interesting. Despite its solo appearance in the New Testament, the word was widely used in Roman and Greek texts. Placing and proving blame and then enacting revenge was key part of the balance of Roman life.

But here, the fault is not coupled with revenge, which would have been expected and approved by the surrounding culture, instead it is coupled with forgiveness. **If one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.** Imagine the stark contrast of Christian forgiveness against the backdrop of Roman revenge. The giving of unmerited forgiveness was unheard of. It's still unheard of. C.S. Lewis writes in Mere Christianity, **"Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive."** When someone wrongs us, we want to hold on to, we let it brew and stew, thinking of what we would say in a confrontation, or what we

would have done differently to get the upper hand in a situation. In the end, instead of elevating others, we find that we're pushing ourselves down into the bottom and trying to drag others with us!

I have a friend who was wrongfully imprisoned for a heinous crime that he didn't commit. He talks about the years he spent in prison reliving things he could not change and planning a revenge that was impossible. It made him bitter, and lonely, a shell of a person. And when we hear stories like that, can you blame him? I think most of us would feel the same way. But his unforgiveness ended up as much a prison as his cell. He came to faith in Jesus and he was eventually exonerated and given his freedom. The work to forgive his accuser was by far the hardest thing he had to do, but the most freeing.

We're called to put up with one another, we're called to forgive each other, and we're called to do all of that with compassion, humility, patience...Like I said, it's a tall order. How do we go about this business of forgiving others? I believe that the answer to that question is found in something that is essential to being a follower of Jesus and that is understanding what it means to be forgiven. To forgive others, we must first understand what it means to be forgiven.

Paul reminds us of this in Colossians 3:13, **"As the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive."** In a similar passage in Ephesians 4:32, he writes, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." But this idea isn't original to the apostle. Jesus ties the forgiveness from God to the forgiveness of others. We say it in the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." More than that, Christ himself paid our debt.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to the world because of love. And world despised and rejected him. Despite his innocence, despite his obedience, he was crucified like a common criminal, and yet he offered words of forgiveness as soldiers bartered for his clothes before nailing him to a cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." If anyone had the right to call down vengeance, it would be Jesus. But instead, through his life of obedience, his death, and resurrection, he offered us forgiveness of our sins.

Unsolicited forgiveness, in that he gave it even before we knew we needed it and even before we wanted it. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He forgave us willingly, graciously, consciously, abundantly, continually, and completely! We are told in scripture that as far as the east is from the west, that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us. And we didn't have to pay for it. He paid for it. We certainly can't do anything to earn it. He earned it. This gift is given freely to all who believe in the Lord Jesus.

I had a seminary professor who would say that each of us has some grievous error, some great sin, a broken relationship, a severe regret that either keeps us up at night fearing for our soul or keeps us up at night crying out Hallelujah, because we have been forgiven. He called it our

“even that” sin. The thing that when we hear the message that we are forgiven, we find ourselves asking “Even that?” To which Jesus answers, “yes, even that.”

I find that when I look at forgiving others through the lens of being forgiven myself, it reframes my thinking. When I find myself saying things like, “But they’ve never apologized,” I remember that Christ died for me while I was still a sinner. When I think they will just offend again, I remember that I am forgiven again and again. When I find myself saying, “Even them?” I am reminded that Christ forgave “even that” for me. And when I find myself unable to forgive, I know that I have Holy Spirit as my helper, empowering me to forgive.

And here is the beautiful thing, when we forgive other’s we find freedom. When we forgive others, we are better able to enjoy the mercy of God. When we forgive others, we allow God to accomplish his restoration in our lives and relationships. We experience a peace that does not make sense to the world, and a love that we cannot comprehend. When we elevate others through the act of forgiveness, we are lifted up in the process too!

Several times a year I am reminded of the power of forgiveness at Alpha when I hear the story of Corrie Ten Boom. Let’s take a look: (Corrie Ten Boom clip)

Can you forgive? No. I can’t either. But he can. Those are words to live by.

We cannot elevate others unless we forgive others. We can’t elevate people when we are holding things against them. We’ll all just end up stuck in the muck if we harbor resentment towards others. The early church was known for being countercultural, abundant in their forgiveness. What would it look like if the 21st-century church was known for their abundant nature. That is what it looks like to be God’s chosen people, marked by compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, shown to those who deserve it the least.