

June 17, 2018 AM
Pastor Ken Hepner

“Forgiving Offenses and Creating a Safe Environment”
Selected Scriptures

Introduction:

This morning we are going to walk through a message that I have been working through in my heart for about a year. I have studied the Scriptures and thought about how to unpack with you, my dear church family, the work we have been doing behind the scenes to minister to men and women who are accused of sex crimes against a minor, people convicted as sexual predators, and people who are now registered as sex-offenders.

When people registered on Megan’s list petition Cedar Grove Church leadership team to be permitted to attend our church, through their parole officers, we intend to have a policy in place to address their request. Let’s be clear at the outset of the message this morning, **a request to attend does not necessarily mean they will be given permission to attend!** As a church staff and leadership team we are committed to holding in tension two very important Biblical principles that we do not see as mutually exclusive of each other.

The first Biblical principle is that we are committed to being a church that offers the **Mercy**, **Grace**, and the **Forgiveness** of God Almighty that was purchased on the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ to every person who steps into the doors of this church building every Sunday morning, every person, regardless of who they are or what their past may have been!

The second Biblical principle is that we are committed to being a church that creates the **Safest Environment** that we can possibly create for our **Children** and **Youth** to be able to come to Cedar Grove, to worship, to fellowship together with each other, and to be taught the Word of God without fear of being harmed in any way.

The Scripture text the Lord has brought to my mind over the past few months is from Jesus’ words to His messengers, as He was sending them out to speak His gospel to others, in Matthew 10:16, 17 *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.”*

Jesus compares His people to sheep sent into the midst of wolves here and in Luke 10:3. He has no illusions about the how vicious the jungle environment which is the world can be to children. He knows this world is full of **Cruelty** and **Violence**, especially against the helpless and the innocent. Jesus told His closest and dearest followers they would be bound and beaten in houses of worship, first century Jewish synagogues, because they belonged to Him!

He says He delivers His own disarmed to the blows of the enemy, for our weapons are of another order, not of this world order of things! Jesus anticipates that some of us will be bitten and torn

to pieces by the very same world that hated Him, slandered Him, ripped Him apart with lies and intrigue, and ultimately crucified Him!

Then Matthew adds another word that is equally remarkable from Jesus. *“Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”* The dove is a symbol in the Bible of purity and innocence while the serpent is the symbol of cleverness and craftiness. The paradox which unites these two opposites shows His followers of all ages a really powerful truth.

We are called to be people of the Spirit and the truth. The fact is that simplicity of heart as we live together as a church family does not exclude the exercise of wisdom and prudence. In other words guys, be prepared to **Do** the **Right Thing** no matter what, especially for those who are **Powerless** and **Defenseless!**

Jesus was especially careful to teach His followers about our **need to provide well for the Care of Children in His Kingdom**. We are going to read an extended passage about the care and protection of children at Cedar Grove, right from Jesus own teaching, so it cannot be mistaken by anyone, Matthew 18:3 – 10:

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

“Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal life. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.”

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

Jesus says, when people intentionally harm children, and in the way we are talking about this morning, sexually assault them, there is a significant danger to that person’s eternal soul. Jesus tells his followers to warn the offenders to take stern measures to deal with that sin, warning them to cut off hands that cause offense or gouge out eyes that cause offenses. In other words, my brothers and sisters, don’t look on this sin lightly! There are no special categories of sin, but there are consequences for sins. Some sins, committed sexually against our own bodies, we never forget!

Since the laws of the land changed in 1994 states are required to list the names and exact residences of convicted sex offenders, on Megan’s list. Since 2001 when the state penal institutions began releasing supposed rehabilitated men and women back into society, churches

are now required to decide if we will choose to permit people to attend public worship and under what terms and considerations we will permit attendance.

Let's begin with some questions this morning about the issue of forgiveness of offenses. What exactly is forgiveness of sins? What does forgiveness do and what does forgiveness not do? What did Jesus come to earth to make available to you and me? What do we give to others?

I. What Jesus Made Available to Us All:

Colossians 2:13 – 15 *“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”*

What the Apostle Paul is saying to the church at Colossae, in these verses is that forgiveness is the **Release of the Life of Jesus into the human heart**, mind, soul, and body. Where sin, sin's power to enslave us, guilt and shame have stood in our lives we are set free through the power of God released into our lives through the forgiveness Jesus provides for us all.

Paul says, *“He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code . . . that stood against us; he took it away nailing it to the cross.”*

Here is how the rest of the New Testament Scriptures point us to what Jesus died and rose again to make available to you and me:

II Corinthians 5:21 *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

Hebrews 9:28 *“so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”*

I Peter 2:24 *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”*

I Peter 3:18 *“For Christ died for sins once for all the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.”*

Paul tells the Colossians and all of us who are Christ's disciples today the truth of the matter is that **Satan's Power is Destroyed through Forgiveness of sins**, cleansing of guilt and shame. The enemy no longer has a legal place to stand to accuse a brother or sister of sin where the blood of Christ Jesus the very Son of God has been applied.

We who have taken by faith and applied His precious blood shed for us through confession and repentance; have received Him as Lord and Savior. Where He reigns sin does not reign. Where His life is lived forgiveness reigns. Forgiveness in Christ Jesus removes the fear and the threat of

judgment for sin, and replaces it with the sweet **Mercy, Grace, and Love of God poured out into us by His Holy Spirit!**

May I ask us to think about a critical question together? When was our forgiveness sealed in the heart of God? The answer is before the creation of the world, Revelation 13:8b. It was accomplished 2000 years ago when Jesus died for our sins and was raised again in victory over sin by the power of the Father God. Before we were even born, let alone believed in Him and repented, our forgiveness was sealed!

II. Giving What We Have Received:

Matthew 6:14, 15 *“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”*

Ephesians 4:32 *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as the Lord forgave you.”*

Colossians 3:13 *“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”*

I have worked with hundreds of people through the years on this issue of our choosing to forgive each other and there are numerous misconceptions I want to attempt to get at first.

- a.) **Forgiveness doesn't mean that you will be able to forget**, that is blot out the memory of the offense. God made us with the ability to remember things. What forgiveness does is removes the pain and the judgment from the offense.
- b.) Consequently, **if you remember an offense done to you** after you have confessed forgiveness to the one who hurt you **it doesn't mean you have not forgiven them**.
- c.) **Forgiveness is a lengthy process** of ownership, confession, and taking Jesus' provisions by faith. It is not a one-time event that is perfectly sealed.
- d.) **Some people think they can justify waiting till the guilty party repents before they choose to forgive them**. What that means is that the one who got hurt is at the mercy of the offender. The person who has been offended or hurt has just given room for bitterness and the pain they feel to expand for as long as the offense remains. Forgiveness is something Jesus and I work out in my heart before the offender even asks for it.

It is important that we remember what the Lord has clearly spoken in His Word. He gave us a law governing all of our human relationships, which too many of us tend to shelve. It is the law of sowing and reaping in our relationships: God's people are called to the responsibility of choosing the **Covering shelter of Love**.

Paul calls us to *“let no debt remaining except the continuing debt to love one another,”* Romans 13:8. Peter adds, I Peter 4:8 *“Above all love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”*

But rather than following the Scriptural **Law of Sowing and Reaping** love and grace we sometimes choose to hold the person responsible for what they did to us, and when we do so we make the choice to not forgive them. This is spiritual and emotional poison to the human heart and soul. Our physical bodies, that is, our blood stream and major organs, are just not made to carry around with us the excess acidic levels that are caused by the stress load and negative emotions of unforgiveness, anger, and bitterness that seethes over time!

We are all wired in with a built in law of self-interest and self-preservation. **When we are hurt and we choose not to forgive we follow an incredible negative cycle of emotional pain and heartache through the choice not to forgive. Satan's kingdom has been using the process of this negative cycle for thousands of years,** under the basic thought, "Why mess with what is working to keep people bound and apart from intimacy with God?"

It begins with a wound, then feelings of shame from having been rejected by someone we deeply respect, **then we feel anger at having been hurt,** followed by **the choice to embrace Self-Defense.**

This is followed closely by **the choice to Be Offended.** The person makes the choice because he/she has concluded that the offense and grievance was so severe that he/she has the right to be offended. The choice to not forgive is justifiable and so it begins to grow in the heart and mind. Consequently, the one who embraces this action in his/her heart, chooses to release powerful internal issues

When we have chosen not to forgive the offense, the natural course of our fleshly nature takes over and grows **Resentment** for the offense and the offender. Resentment releases incredible poison into the blood stream of the one who embraces it!

As resentment grows over time we permit the growth of a root of inner **Bitterness,** and ultimately we make involuntary choices to **Retaliate.** (We don't go out and beat people up because we are Christians. What we do is we vent our hurt to as many people as will listen, and share prayer concerns for the person who hurt us.)

That's why the Hebrew author tells us to not let "*a bitter root spring up among you to cause trouble and defile many.*" How does a bitter root spring up in me and defile many others? When I speak about that bitter root to other people, now they are infected with those same feelings of hurt that I have been infected by. If you or I have a bitter root in our hearts and lay the axe of remorse and repentance to that root we will find in it, resentment, anger, hurt, and a person's face and name!

I have watched godly, warm, and caring people become hardened and embittered over time because they simply refused to forgive someone of an offense that had been done to them. I have one more key principle to give you: **In Jesus all sins die, the ones we did and the ones done to us.** It is faith in the same cleansing act that alone avails for both our sins and the sins that others have done to us!

So the truth I am sharing with us as a Church family this morning is quite simple. We are a society of **Forgiven** people. We must be **Forgiving** people! We are each held responsible by the Lord Jesus Christ to freely give away to others the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of sin, the Cross of Jesus Christ has bestowed on us. The call to give a covering of love of God demands us to forgive people whether they ever ask for it or not!

III. The Tension: Being Gracious and Merciful and Safety Precautions for All People!

In the first two points of the message this morning I have been speaking to us as individuals. Now I am speaking to us as a collective gathering of individuals, His Church, the body of Christ at Cedar Grove. We must be people who love, accept and forgive others regardless of their past. This is our calling as a local body of believers in Christ Jesus. **We must represent the heart of Jesus for the lost, the broken, the hurting and the downtrodden in life.**

However, we must also create a safe environment for everyone who worships here at Cedar Grove, **especially those who are too small to defend themselves or provide for their own safety**, our **children and younger youth**. As leaders in the body here, we have been working on a Policy Statement for exactly how we will walk with any person who is a convicted sex offender or predator, who petitions us as a leadership team, through their parole officer to attend church at Cedar Grove Church.

Our forgiveness of them means we will not judge them. It does not mean we will believe their words until we see accompanying fruit over time! Our forgiveness of the offenders must comply with the laws of the land. **Our forgiveness for the offender is not** being able to forget what he or she did, **nor is it** deliverance from what caused them to do the crime in the first place – that is between them and God, **nor is it** blanket trust.

We will create a team of people who will work at this issue together, people who have expertise in this field, who will not be easily hoodwinked, or duped into believing the stories of men or women who are saying and doing all of the right things but whose hearts have not yet been truly changed!

There are a number of minimum guarantees I can assure you of as I share this message with you today:

1. We will thoroughly vet every person, who has been convicted of and released from prison for or accused of sexual crimes against children, who petitions us asking for permission to attend services at Cedar Grove Church, not only through their relationships but also with the authorities to whom they are accountable.
2. We will create a Task Force of people who will do the vetting of applicants to be permitted to attend services at Cedar Grove Church. Those who are part of that Task Force will be people who have experience at working with people who have been convicted of these types of crimes before, and at least one staff person.
3. The approved attendees will have a chaperone who will meet them at their car in the parking lot, will accompany them every second they are in our building, will be with

them until they are back in their car, and will not return to the church until they are safely off of church grounds and on their way home.

4. They will not be permitted to go anywhere except in the public worship center (Life Center) and if they need a restroom, their chaperone will assure that it is unoccupied while it is being used by them.
5. This vetting and chaperoning process is for the safety of our children and youth and for the protection of the offender, so they will not be put in any compromising position nor will they be placed in any position at which they would be open to false accusations, because they will never be alone in our building.

“I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman. For what has God above chosen for us? What is our inheritance from the Almighty on high? Isn't it calamity for the wicked and misfortune for those who do evil? Doesn't he see everything I do and every step I take?”

“Have I lied to anyone or deceived anyone? Let God weigh me on the scales of justice, for he knows my integrity. If I have strayed from his pathway, or if my heart has lusted for what my eyes have seen, or if I am guilty of any other sin, then let someone else eat the crops I have planted. Let all that I have planted be uprooted.”

“If my heart has been seduced by a woman, or if I have lusted for my neighbor's wife, then let my wife serve another man; let other men sleep with her. For lust is a shameful sin, a crime that should be punished. It is a fire that burns all the way to hell. It would wipe out everything I own.”

“Forgiving Offenses and Creating a Safe Environment”

Introduction:

The message is about how we will seek to minister to people who are accused or convicted sexual offenders.

The tension we must hold between two Biblical principles:

--We are committed to offering the **M**_____, **G**_____, and the **F**_____ of God to every person who attends here.

--We are committed to creating the **S**_____ **E**_____ we can possibly create for our children and younger youth.

The Scripture text the Lord has brought to me over the past months is Matthew 10:16, 17, Jesus compares us to sheep in a wolf pack. He says the world is often vicious toward children.

He knows this world is full of **C**_____ and **V**_____ especially against the helpless and the innocent! Matthew adds His words: *“Be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves.”*

We are called to be people of the Spirit and the truth of God. Be prepared to do the **R**_____
T_____ no matter what, especially for the powerless and the defenseless ones among you!

Jesus was especially careful to teach His followers of all ages about the need to provide well for the **C**_____
of **C**_____ in His kingdom! Mathew 18:3 – 10

When people intentionally harm children, especially in the ways we are talking about his morning, there is incredible danger to their eternal souls! Jesus urges His followers to teach them to use drastic measures in dealing with their sins!

Let’s begin with what forgiveness is and is not, what forgiveness does and does not do.

I. What Jesus Made Available to Us All: Colossians 2:13 – 15

What Paul is saying to us is, forgiveness is the **R**_____ of the **L**_____ of Jesus in the human heart and life.

Here are some other New Testament Scripture texts that validate what Paul is saying in this text. II Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 9:28, I Peter 2:24, and I Peter 3:18

Paul writes that the truth is Satan’s power over us all is **D**_____ through the **F**_____ of **S**_____. All that stood against us and caused us guilt is removed in Jesus!

Forgiveness removes the fear of judgement for sin and replaces it with **M**_____, **G**_____, and **L**_____ of God poured out in our hearts.

II. Giving What We Have Received: Matthew 6:14, Ephesians 4:32

There are four common misconceptions about forgiveness of offenses.

God’s people are called to choose to the **C**_____ shelter of **L**_____, Romans 13:8, I Peter 4:8

When we get hurt in life we will choose to follow one of two laws, the law of sowing and reaping grace or the law of self-defense, self-preservation.

When we get hurt and we **C**_____ to not **F**_____ there is a clearly discernable pattern or internal trail we follow:

--We feel **H**_____ and it soon turns to **A**_____ toward the one who did the offense ...

--This is followed by the choice to be **O**_____ ...

--The choice not to forgive empowers our fleshly nature to take its natural course to create inner **R**_____ toward the one who hurt us.

--This leads us to permit the growth of a "root of **B**_____ " ...

--The Hebrew author tells us a root of bitterness in us springs up and defiles many. The reason is we speak our hurt to anyone who will listen to us!

We are a **F**_____ people. We must be a **F**_____ people.

III. The Tension: Grace and Mercy and Safety Precautions for Everyone:

In the first two points the message was shared to us as individuals. This point is shared with us as a Church family. We must hold the tension between being gracious to all, even those who struggle mightily and safe for all, particularly those who cannot protect themselves.

Some minimum guarantees we will insure...

A concluding Scripture from Job...

Discussion Starter Questions for Home Groups

1. As you think about God's perspective of children and what our sin-sick society has done to children, what is behind the way people of the world often treat children? What is the real issue?
2. We must hold in tension offering grace to everyone while creating a safe environment for all people, especially small children. Why is that so important? What do you think the Bible says about the tension?
3. In your opinion do you think most Christians truly understand that we are sent into the world unarmed like sheep in the wolf pack? Why? Why not?
4. Why do you think Jesus was so hard on those who sinned against small children, as He spoke to His followers in Matthew 18?
5. Do you think most followers of Jesus consider the fact that forgiveness of sins really is the flow of the divine life of Jesus into the human arena?
6. Do you agree there are some common misconceptions about forgiveness, what it is and what it does?
7. How does a root of bitterness in our lives spring up in us and defile many other people in our sphere of influence?
8. What is your opinion of the minimum guarantees the leadership team of Cedar Grove is seeking to make regarding the policy on sexual offenders?
9. Read together aloud Matthew 18:1 - 10 and discuss insights you have from the text about why the Lord Jesus was so hard on sinning against children.
10. What are some things the Lord God spoke to your own heart and life as you heard the message? Are there things you can do to help to create the place of mercy and grace for people who attend Cedar Grove Church? Are there ways you can help to insure the safety of our small children on Sunday mornings?