

Have a new attitude toward those who have hurt you

Introduction

These verses can be summed up by the phrase "Have a new attitude to those who have hurt you." They come at the end of a section in Paul's letter to the Ephesians where he is talking about the new life that those who belong to Christ are to lead. Those of us who belong to Christ are to be different from the non-Christians around us. We used to be just like them, living selfish pleasure-seeking lives that were far from God. But now we are to be different. The apostle uses the analogy of a person who is wearing filthy clothes. A person dressed in filthy clothes, if he is going to be different, needs to take off his old clothes, then he needs to have a bath, and then he needs to put on new clothes. In the same way, the apostle says, we are to "put off" the old man, the old way of living, like a person takes off an old set of clothes, we are to be renewed in the way we think, which is the equivalent of taking a bath, and then we are to "put on" the new man, the new way of living, just like a new set of clothes. The apostle gives a number of examples in our everyday life. In each of these examples he follows a similar pattern: he says what aspect of the old way of living we are to put off, what aspect of the new way of living we are to put on, and the reason why we are to do this.

These verses we are thinking about now follow a similar pattern. The apostle tells us what we are to put off, what we are to put on, and the new way of thinking that we are to have. I plan to follow his outline in what follows.

1. What we are to put off

Paul, in effect, says that as Christians we must put off, get rid of, all those wrong ways of thinking and speaking which we used to have towards those who hurt us before we became Christians. Before God worked in our lives we were unable to respond in the right way when people mistreated us. When we experienced wrong at the hands of others it was inevitable that this would lead to bitterness, anger, quarrelling, backbiting, and evil. But, he says, those bad ways of thinking and speaking must now be got rid of. Paul uses six words to describe the ways of thinking and speaking that we must get rid of as Christians.

1) Bitterness

What is bitterness? Here is one description that I have read:

Bitterness is a state of the spirit. It denotes a sort of persistent sourness and an absence of amiability. It is an unloving condition. Indeed, it is a condition which never sees anything good in anything, but always contrives to see something wrong, or some defect or deficiency. (D M Lloyd-Jones Ephesians 4.17 – 5.17: Darkness and Light (Banner of Truth, 1982, p. 279)

Where does bitterness come from? Lack of forgiveness. Someone does something wrong against you. At first you are angry. A few verses before the verses we are looking at now, the apostle said "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4.26). What happens if you go to bed angry? When you wake up your anger has turned into resentment. If that resentment is not got rid of, and you carry on nursing your grievance, in the end it turns into bitterness.

And that bitterness affects your whole outlook on life. It is like bitter poison from a snake bite. At first only a small area local to the bite is affected. But gradually the poison spreads

through the whole body, so that eventually there is not a cell in the body that is not affected. So it is with bitterness. It spreads throughout your life, so that your whole outlook ultimately is affected. Ultimately every time you open your mouth it is tinged with bitterness, misery, and cynicism. All those around you are affected by it, and the misery and gloom spreads to all with whom you have contact.

Paul says get rid of all bitterness. Every trace of bitterness. Those things that were done against you, perhaps many years ago, forgive, and put out of your mind once and for all.

2) Rage and anger

The next two words, "rage and anger" we shall take together. Now there is a place for righteous anger, as the apostle says a few verses earlier, where he says "in your anger do not sin" (Ephesians 4.26). The apostle speaks later on about the wrath of God which "comes against those who are disobedient". God is not wrong to have wrath or anger against men's sin. By the same token it is right that we should have an indignation, a horror and a revulsion about sin committed against God and against other people. Clearly what the apostle has in mind here, however, is not righteous anger, but sinful anger. When is anger sinful? Here are some occasions when anger will be sinful anger:

When our anger is directed at those who have injured us personally. Such is the sinfulness of our own hearts, that if we get angry with those who have harmed us personally, we shall inevitably sin. Why do I say this? Because we shall inevitably find ourselves taking vengeance or retribution on those who have wronged us personally. The Scripture tells us that vengeance belongs to the Lord. It is his job to judge those who have wronged us. We are not in a position

to do so. We are too close; too emotionally involved; too guilty of sin ourselves, to be able to be angry with others for the wrong they have done us without sinning. So anger directed at those who have hurt us personally will be sinful anger.

When our anger is uncontrolled. If we find ourselves raising our voices, shaking with rage, saying cruel and unkind things, then we have crossed the line from righteous to unrighteous anger. We are sinning.

When anger, perhaps anger which has a legitimate basis, is mixed with a sinful attitude. For example, you might see someone doing wrong against another person, and you might rightly have a sense of indignation and anger towards the person who is doing wrong. But if that anger becomes tinged with a "holier than thou" attitude whereby you judge the other person and look down on him, then what might otherwise have been a righteous anger has been polluted by sin and has become an unrighteous anger. Your anger, though legitimate in its origin, has become a vehicle for sin.

Paul says that this sinful rage and anger is to be got rid of.

3) Brawling

The word that Paul uses here is a word which is translated elsewhere as "to cry" or "to shout". Clearly what he has in mind is the situation where there is a quarrel with raised voices. It is quite unseemly for a Christian to get involved in such a quarrel. We must get rid of brawling.

4) Slander

The word that Paul uses is the same word from which we get our word "blasphemy". Normally we think of blasphemy as insulting God, and indeed the word is used in that sense as

well in the Bible. But here clearly it is intended to speak of insulting, rude, unpleasant or unkind things that are said to, or about, others. There is a very close link between blasphemy against men and blasphemy against God, because men are made in God's image. So if you blaspheme men, you are indeed blaspheming God. James makes this very point in his letter, chapter 3 verses 9 and 10:

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.

What is the first thing you are tempted to do when someone hurts you? To run off to someone else and tell them about it, and retell what happened in such a way as you are made to look completely innocent and the other person is made to look most at fault. Why do we do this? Because of pride and lack of love in our hearts. Because we want to get our own back on the other person, albeit in a subtle way. If someone does wrong against us we should answer kindly to them, and lovingly and humbly point out where they have done wrong. We should not repeat the matter to another person, unless there is a compelling and loving reason to do so. We must get rid of slander, or blasphemy.

5) Malice

Paul says that the believers must get rid of "every form of malice". What is malice? Where you want harm or evil to come to others. It can take many forms. It can take the form of cursing someone. It can take the form of hoping and praying for harm to come their way. It can take the form of taking steps to see that harm actually does come their way, by

planning and actively working towards them getting hurt or even killed. We must get rid of malice.

What do all these words that Paul has used have in common? They are all sinful responses to wrongdoing done to us by others. They all have at root a refusal to forgive, a bearing of a grudge. Paul is saying, in effect, get rid of all aspects of an unforgiving spirit.

2. What we should put on

We come now to the right way of thinking, speaking and living that we are to put on. You notice that Biblical Christianity is not just a matter of negatives, "don't do this", "don't do that". There are the negatives, but also the positives. We must not just negatively kill off sin in our lives. We must also positively cultivate goodness. To put it another way, once we purge wrongdoing from our thinking and actions, we need to fill the vacuum with good and positive thoughts and actions. Otherwise the void will be filled with other sins.

There are three words which the apostle uses to describe the new way of thinking and living that we are to have.

1) Be kind to one another

The word that is translated "be kind" means "be useful to others", "be serviceable", "be helpful". And the word has a sense of continuing development, "be becoming kind." Here is the opposite of the sullen, resentful, miserable and bitter individual. Here is someone who is going out of his way to be as helpful as possible to others, particularly to those who are weaker than him, or who are in particular need. The person who is kind even to those who have done wrong against him is obeying what the Lord said when he said in the Sermon on the Mount

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5.43-45)

God is kind to those who have done wrong to him. We should be kind to those who have done wrong to us.

2) Be compassionate

The New Testament writers saw the bowels, or the guts, as the place where you feel things. So the word that Paul used means literally "well bowelled". We are to have, he says, very deep and sympathetic feelings for others. Today we tend to use the word "heart" to speak of our feelings. So our modern translation says "compassionate" or another one says "tender-hearted".

Now remember, we are talking here about the Christian attitude not to our friends, but to those who have hurt us. What mother will not be tender-hearted towards her newborn baby? But what about if that baby grows up to become a rebellious teenage son? Will she find it easy to be tender-hearted then? Or what newly-wed wife does not have the most tender thoughts towards her new husband. But what if he turns out to be a drunkard and a wife-batterer? Will she still be tender-hearted then? Or what about the person who breaks into your house while you are away on holiday? Do you find it easy to be tender-hearted towards that individual who does this? Yet this is what Paul is calling us to have. Tender hearts for those who mistreat us.

3) Forgive each other

This phrase is really the key to all we have been thinking about in this booklet. What is the answer to bitterness, sinful anger, noisy quarrelling, slander, and malice? How can we be kind and tender-hearted, even to those who have wronged us? Only by forgiving from the heart. This is what God calls us to do: no longer to hold against individuals things they have done wrong against us, but instead to forgive them totally and unconditionally; even if they have never asked for forgiveness, to forgive them anyway; to put out of your mind wrong things they have done; not to let the wrong things they have done affect your relationship with them; to have as warm feelings towards them now as you did before they did what they did.

Now it may be that if someone is a continuing threat to you or your family you will need to make some changes to practical arrangements, out of love for the person who has wronged you, and for the protection of those you love. But this should not be out of malice, or lack of forgiveness, but in love. For example, the wife who has an alcoholic of a husband may have to separate from him to protect her children. But still there should be a forgiving attitude, and a desire for the good of the individual, and a longing for restoration of the relationship to normality.

And within the church, there needs to be this constant stream of love and forgiveness flowing towards one another. Every day we shall sin and let each other down. Every day we shall need to forgive each other if fellowship is to be maintained. Between Christian husbands and wives, and between parents and children, and between siblings, there needs to be this constant forgiving of one another, because, sadly, we are fallen beings and we are all sinning every day.

Forgiveness for relationships between Christians is what oil is for motor engines. If there is no oil in a motor engine, the engine will seize up and is liable to become a write-off. So, if

there is no forgiveness in church life, the fellowship is liable to grind to a halt. Divisions, misunderstandings, factions and quarreling will rip the church apart and make it quite useless for reaching out to others with the Gospel.

3. The Reason we are to do this

I want us now to consider the reason why we must, as Christians, have this forgiving spirit towards those who have mistreated us. The answer is in verse 32. "Forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Here is the glory of the Gospel! If you are a true Christian who has come to God through the Lord Jesus Christ, God has forgiven you. Completely! Every last sinful thing you have ever done, said, or thought has been forgiven, and every wrong thing you ever will do has also been forgiven already. God no longer holds these things against you. He has forgiven you your sins, and he remembers them no more. He says "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31.34). The Scriptures promise that God will "hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:19). The Psalmist says that "as far as the East is from the West, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103.12).

Note that the apostle says that God "has forgiven us". The transaction is already complete. The deed is done. The debt is paid. Because the debt is paid, there is nothing more to pay. The whole debt is paid in full.

How can this be? The apostle says, "God in Christ forgave you". In Christ, as he hung on that Cross, God forgave you. Jesus died as your substitute. He was punished for your wrongdoing. The wrath that should have come upon you was poured out on him.

This is why you must forgive your fellow man. If God has forgiven you such a great debt, how can you not forgive your fellow man who owes you a much smaller amount? Remember the parable of the unforgiving servant, as recorded in Matthew 18.21 – 35. Here was this King who wanted to collect his debts. A man was brought before him who owed him the equivalent of millions of pounds. He was unable to pay the King back, and the king ordered that he and his family should be sold into slavery to repay at least some of the debt. But the man pleaded with the King to have mercy on him, and the King forgave him the debt. Then, on his way out, the servant who had been forgiven such a huge debt came across another servant who owed him the equivalent of just a pound or two. The first servant violently demanded his money back. The second servant pleaded for him to have mercy, but the first servant refused, and had the second servant put in prison. When the King heard about this he was very angry with the first servant. He had behaved atrociously. He had himself received so much mercy, but he had refused to have mercy on his fellow servant. The point of the story is clear. We owe God a huge debt. He has forgiven us that whole debt. In comparison, what others owe us for the wrong they have done is miniscule. We are duty-bound to forgive them. Not to do so would be atrocious.

Now, in what I have said so far in this sermon I have been assuming that you are a Christian. But perhaps you have bitterness and resentment in your heart, and this is because in fact you are not a real Christian at all. Perhaps you yourself have never known what it means to be forgiven by God, and therefore you find it impossible to forgive others. If that is your condition, I need to say two things to you. Firstly, I need to warn you that the bitterness, resentment, anger, slander and malice that characterise your life are adding day by day more and more to the already huge list of sins for which you are going to have to give an account to Christ on the

judgement day. You need to be saved, as otherwise you will have a terrible time in Hell for all of eternity on account of these and other sins. But the second thing to say to you is that complete and total forgiveness is available to you through Christ. If you will but turn from your sin and come to him and trust in him, all your sins will be completely washed away, and you will be given a new heart and the ability to love your enemies. If you have not as yet been saved then come to God through Christ. Seek him for that forgiveness that is available. Do not delay. Christ may come at any time or you may die, and then it will be too late. Come quickly. The door is open now, but one day soon it will shut. Come to him before it is too late.

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