

LIVING IN COMMUNITY IN WAYS THAT GLORIFY GOD

(Ken Williams)

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 15:5-6

Few things glorify God more than living together in a spirit of unity according to the teachings of His Word. And few things are more destructive than *not* doing so! As personnel we are often required to live in close community with others. To be effective in our lives and ministry, we must live out Christ's love for one another; but close living makes this a challenge! It can only happen as God makes it possible, and as we live it out by His grace.

Colossians 3:12-14 discusses foundational issues in living God's way in community.

To be effective in our lives and ministry, we must live out Christ's love for one another.

Verse 12 gives the underlying motivation for doing this: we are "God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved." He loves us so dearly that He chose us to be His, and has made us holy through the blood of Jesus. He did this not only for us, but for all of His children—even the ones we struggle with. Therefore He is very concerned about how His children are treated, just as an earthly parent is concerned about his or her children. As we fully comprehend this, not only for ourselves, but for our brothers and sisters, we become motivated to live with them in ways that please Him

This verse also identifies five key attributes with which we must clothe ourselves daily: "*compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*" As we put these on, they are consistently demonstrated in our actions toward one another.

Colossians 3:13-14 provides three essential elements of living in community. These flow

out of the five qualities of verse 12. *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

POSITIVE ELEMENTS

Let's consider these three *positive* elements of living in community, and three *negative* elements that destroy community.

Love

Love is the basis and foundation of everything else. Love is the all-in-all of living in community. It must underlie everything else that is good. It is what binds all the rest together in perfect unity. Without it, we cannot glorify God in our community.

Since love binds all the other qualities and actions together, we will focus on some of its key manifestations.

Forgiving One Another

This is one of the most difficult things in the Christian life. Forgiving one another with impeccable consistency is absolutely essential for glorifying God in community. It is *not* optional!

(Please refer to "*Thoughts on Forgiving*" following this article.)

Bearing With One Another

Bearing with, in the Christian context means *enduring and accepting* others as Christ accepts us, especially when they fail to meet our expectations and standards.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Romans 15:1

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. Romans 15:7 (in the context of bearing with the weak)

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 4:2

...bear with each other. Colossians 3:13

1. Patience is an essential quality in bearing with one another.

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense. Proverbs 19:11

2. Patience is a key ingredient in love and a fruit of the Spirit.

Love is patient, love is kind...
I Corinthians 13:4

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness , goodness, faithfulness... Galatians 5:22

3. We must deal with our temper to be able to demonstrate patience.

A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly.
Proverbs 14:29

A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.
Proverbs 15:18

Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city. Proverbs 16:32

4. Patience does *not* mean we do not correct, warn and even rebuke others.

And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

I Thessalonians 5:14

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

II Timothy 4:2

DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENTS

Now let's look at three destructive behaviors that can devastate a community and bring dishonor to God. We will avoid these if we are living out Colossians 3:12-14. There are many others but these may be the most damaging in communities.

Comparing

God's Word does not say a lot about comparing, but how often does God have to say it for us to take it seriously? Comparing ourselves with other people can be very destructive to community whether we see them as better than us or worse than us.

Not that we venture to class or compare ourselves with those who command themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.
II Corinthians. 10:12 (RSV)

Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.
Galatians 6:4

Comparing ourselves with others is so destructive because it can lead to other damaging elements: judging, gossip and slander.

Judging

There are times when we must make judgments about behavior that is clearly sinful. But the kind of judging that is destructive to community involves judging others' motives, actions, attitudes, and personality issues that are not sinful, but that do not come up to our personal standards and expectations. This usually involves condemning others.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Matthew 7:1-2

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Luke 6:37

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you so pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?
Romans 2:1-3

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls! And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.
Romans 14:4

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.
Romans 14:14

...have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? James 2:4

Gossip and Slander

Gossip and slander are two sides of the same coin. Gossip may be true. Slander is lying about others. Webster defines slander as "An utterance of false charges of misrepresentations which defame and damage another's reputation."

Gossip and slander are clear signs that we are not forgiving and bearing with others. They are a blatant denial of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience!

Gossip and slander are clearly identified as evil in the Word. Note how they are included in lists of some of the most terrible sins.

Gossip and slander are clear signs that we are not forgiving and bearing with others.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.
Matthew 15:19

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers...Romans 1:29-30

For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.
II Corinthians 12:20

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Ephesians 4:31

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.
Colossians 3:8

Remind the people...to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men. Titus 3:1-2
Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. I Peter 2:1

Listening to gossip may be as wrong as gossiping yourself.

In James 4:11, slander and judging are linked together: *Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.*

1. Gossip is a trust buster.

A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.
Proverbs 11:13

2. It is destructive to relationships.

It not only hurts the person gossiped about, but it can also turn people against the one who gossips. It can destroy trust in two ways. When a person finds out someone has gossiped about him, trust is destroyed between the two. But also, if someone gossips to you about someone else, it can destroy trust by making you wonder what he is saying about you behind your back.

A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.
Proverbs 16:28

Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.

Proverbs 26:20

3. Grumbling against others is a form of gossip and sometimes slander. God takes a dim view of grumbling.

Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

James 5:9

4. Listening to gossip may be as wrong as gossiping yourself. Listening to gossip is deliciously tempting, but affects us very deeply as we listen. We need to become skilled at stopping others who gossip.

The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts. Proverbs 18:8; 26:22

A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.

Proverbs 20:19

Summary

Let us diligently live out God's Word in our communities, and so bring glory to Him not only through our work, but through how we related to one another.

THOUGHTS ON FORGIVING

**Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other,
just as in Christ God forgave you.**

Ephesians 4:32

The ability and willingness to consistently forgive may be *the* most important factor in personal effectiveness. Consider the following:

- Conflict resolution and reconciliation are possible only through forgiveness.
- Interpersonal and personal peace depend on it.
- Our testimony to the world and to young believers stands on it.
- God's power in our lives is demonstrated through it.
- It is an essential element in spiritual warfare.
- God is glorified as we live it out in our community, and with those in our host country.

Forgiving others is not optional in the Christian life. It is an absolute necessity. Mathew 18:21-35 shows how important this is to God. See also Matthew 6:14-15, and Mark 11:25-26.

Forgiveness has three aspects: 1) to grant free pardon for an offense or debt, 2) to give up all claim on account of it, and 3) to cease to feel resentment. (Webster)

Let's look at what God says about it, and consider other practical issues.

1. To not forgive provides Satan with an opening into our community.

In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.
Ephesians 4:26-27

If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.
II Corinthians 2:10-11

2. Forgiveness is linked to the second great command.

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.
Leviticus 19:18

3. Forgiving others is essential to our own forgiveness.

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.
Matthew 6:14-15

Forgiving one another with impeccable consistency is absolutely essential for glorifying God in community.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.
Matthew 18:35

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. Mark 11:25

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Luke 6:37

4. Our forgiving must be without limit.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven."
Matthew 18:21-22

So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day,

and seven times comes back to you and says, “I repent”, forgive him. Luke 17:3-4

Forgiving others is not optional in the Christian life. It is an absolute necessity.

Prior Issues

Following are some issues that are critical if we are to be effective in forgiving. These need to be dealt with in our lives *before* we get into situations where we need to forgive.

1. Fully understand that God's forgiveness of us is the basis for our forgiving others. God has forgiven us *far more* than we will ever have to forgive others. See Matthew 18:21-35; Ephesians 4:32

2. Realize the consequences of not forgiving. We must seriously weigh the dire consequences of failing to forgive. Let us look at some of these:

a) *It can destroy us spiritually.* Refusing to forgive can keep us from God's forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15). It is hard to imagine anything worse! In II Corinthians 2:10-11, Paul indicates that it allows Satan to outwit us, and we can be sure that he will use it. Ephesians 4:26-27 implies that not resolving our anger gives the devil a foothold. An unforgiving spirit may be our greatest enemy to spiritual health—personally and as a community. See Matthew 18:21-35 for a chilling story.

b) *It can destroy us emotionally.* Every Christian counselor well knows the incredible destruction that resentment causes to emotional well-being. Even the slightest grudge is a cancer that eats away at the soul.

c) *It can destroy us physically.* None of These Diseases by S. I. McMillan graphically illustrates how resentment is implicated in many

diseases. Psalm 32:3-4 confirms this.

d) *It can destroy others.* Resentment is contagious; it causes others to turn bitter also. Unresolved anger can cause great damage to those around us. See Proverbs 17:9, & 27:4.

3. When you need to forgive someone, review these consequences before allowing yourself the costly choice of not forgiving. This can be a powerful motivation to forgive.

4. Make a prior decision to forgive everyone who hurts or offends you. This is a lifetime commitment to grant pardon to every person who hurts or offends us. We need to be completely free from resentment toward others, without exception. You may have done this before, but need to renew your commitment. Write out your commitment, along with the date, and keep it where you can be reminded of it often.

5. Empty your “resentment tank.” Take time to look back to see if there is anyone you have not forgiven, or for whom you have not completed the work of forgiveness.

Resentments can be buried for years and do great damage without our being aware of it. Whether resentment goes back years or only to yesterday, it must be dealt with.

Take time to work through feelings you still hold toward each person who has hurt you in any way. Then ask the Spirit to reveal any resentments that may be buried so deep you have “forgotten” them. He can bring them to mind little by little. What joy you will experience when you finally find your “resentment tank” completely empty!

Steps to Forgiving

These “steps” are not always taken in this order. In fact, throughout the process you may need to return to one or more of them and walk through them again. You may not need to go through each step to achieve forgiveness in every situation.

1. Express your feelings to God. Yes, He knows how you feel, but pouring it out to Him provides several benefits. Here are a few:

- a) *It keeps us from deceiving ourselves into thinking we are not angry.*
- b) *It gives us an opportunity to vent our anger in a safe, nondestructive way.*
- c) *It brings God into our situation in a very personal way.*
- d) *It enables Him to carry the burden with us.*
- e) *He often begins to calm our anger, hurt, disappointment, grief, and related feelings as we pour them out to Him.*

Note how David poured out his feelings to God in the Psalms.

2. Recognize your lack of forgiveness and name it for what it is. It is important to actually say, "I have not yet forgiven". This is sometimes difficult because our hearts try to deceive us and keep us from admitting that we have not forgiven (Jeremiah 17:9). The Word denounces the tendency to cover up a lack of forgiveness. Proverbs 10:18 says, "He who conceals his hatred has lying lips." We must be honest with ourselves about it before we can deal with it.

3. Confess it to God. After acknowledging to yourself that you have not forgiven, confess it to the Lord, and accept His promise to cleanse. It may not be sin to initially feel angry at someone (Mark 3:5), but it so easily becomes sin when we do not let go of the anger (Ephesians 4:26). Unconfessed anger turns into something more destructive as time goes by, such as resentment, bitterness, rage, self-pity, depression, malice and slander.

4. Make a decision to forgive. Forgiveness is an act of the will. We can choose to forgive because He gives us "his incomparably great power" to do so (Ephesians 1:19).

A clear sign of a grudge is the need to take people on a museum tour of old hurts and injustices.

A decision to forgive is based on Christ's forgiveness of us, His effective power in us, and the dire consequences of *not* forgiving. Tell God about your decision to forgive. Ask Him to resolve your feelings and to give you power to release the person from your mind.

Forgiveness is a *process*. It takes time. Do not give up. You may need to make a general decision to forgive the person, then individual decisions as specific hurts come to mind.

5. Act contrary to your feelings. A Biblical key to overcoming anger and resentment is to act contrary to those very feelings, even though you probably do not feel like it. This is especially helpful when you are working through a decision to forgive. However, if the person continues to hurt you, you still must go and try to resolve the conflict.

Once this is done and you have made a decision to forgive, begin to act in loving ways toward him. This does not make you a hypocrite! Your loving actions, though inconsistent with your feelings, are totally consistent with your desire to be what God wants you to be.

Do not wait for your feelings to change before acting! *It is always easier to act your way into new feelings than to feel your way into new acting.*

The very first time anger was recorded in the Bible, God laid down this principle for handling it. Genesis 4:6-7 (NASB) says, "The Lord said to Cain, 'why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, *sin is crouching at the door...*'" We master sin through right action. Ephesians 4:26-27 indicates that timing is vital. The longer we wait, the more difficult feelings are to handle without sinning.

List actions that are contrary to your feelings, and do them. Begin by praying for the person, and asking God to bless them. See Luke 6:27-28 and Romans 12:14,17,20-21. When someone has hurt you demonstrate your love and concern for him. Ask yourself, "What would I like *him or her* to do if the situation were reversed?"

It is always easier to act your way into new feelings than to feel your way into new acting.

6. Seek to identify the cause. When we are hurt, offended and/or angered in our relationships, we automatically believe the other person's actions are the cause of our feelings. But It may be that they only *trigger* unresolved issues in our lives. The *cause* is often internal, but the person *triggers* the feeling. Something unresolved within us causes it. We tend to focus on the trigger and avoid looking at the cause.

If you find yourself often struggling with intense feelings of hurt and anger toward other, consider whether they may be triggering unhealed pain in you. It may be that counseling would help resolve it.

7. Do everything possible to seek reconciliation. It is not enough just to let go of our feelings. We need to do what we can to restore our relationship with the person. See Matthew 5:23-24. However, keep in mind that it takes both sides to accomplish reconciliation. Our responsibility is to do everything we can to be reconciled. Romans 12:18 says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." If the other person refuses to be reconciled to us, the best way to "live at peace" with him *may* be to avoid forcing ourselves on him.

Questions about Forgiving

Forgiving is a complicated process. Here are some common questions that arise:

1. What if the other person does not repent? Do I still have to forgive? Only one reference in Scripture (Luke 17:3-4)

mentions the person repenting. All other references talk about forgiving no matter what the other person does. Forgiveness is more for us than for the other person. If we do not forgive, we may not hurt the other person, but it will eat away at us.

2. Is forgiving just a decision? Should I be able to do it immediately?

Scripture does not address this issue, but in most cases it seems that forgiveness is a *process*. It often takes time, but it begins with a decision. To expect instant change in our feelings is often unrealistic. It can lead to self-condemnation, discouragement and giving up.

3. When I forgive, should I be able to forget? Forgiving does not mean that we must forget the incident; we will probably still remember it. But true forgiveness happens when we remember the incident, but our *emotional memory* has forgotten. That is, feelings of anger or resentment no longer well up within us when we think about it. We may still feel grief, sadness and/or hurt, but the *anger* is gone. When people say, "I can forgive, but I can't forget," they often mean they still feel angry and have not forgiven.

4. What if I have decided to forgive, but I cannot get over the anger? It may be that you have not followed through on forgiveness by applying Luke 6:27-28 and Romans 12:14, 17, 20-21. Remember, we must act out our forgiveness by demonstrating the love of Jesus. Often that is the missing ingredient in completing the forgiveness.

You may need to enlist help, from a counselor or a good friend. James 5:16 says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Be sure to focus on your feelings and the need to forgive rather than on what the other person did, even though that may need to be said. Beware of the danger of infecting the other person with your anger.

We must act out our forgiveness by demonstrating the love of Jesus. Often that is the missing ingredient in completing the forgiveness.

5. What if someone sins against us as a community? We must forgive as a community, as well as individually. See II Corinthians 2:5-11. A community can develop resentment just as an individual can, and this needs to be dealt with as a group, not just individually.

Some Myths about Forgiving

1. If I forgive, I must excuse him for what he did. Forgiving is not saying that what the person did was O.K. It is not excusing sin. It is not saying that what happened really was not a big deal.

2. If I forgive, I must trust the person unconditionally. Forgiving does not mean

we must automatically trust him if there is no repentance, and if there is no indication that he has dealt with his untrustworthiness. But we must be *willing* to trust.

3. Forgiving means I must have a close relationship with the person. This is not necessarily true, especially if the person is destructive to us, living in sin, or does not want a close relationship. Jesus did not have a close relationship with everyone he forgave.

4. If I have truly forgiven, I must be reconciled to the person. Forgiving and reconciling are two different issues. We cannot be reconciled without forgiving; but forgiving is unilateral. Reconciliation requires *both* parties to participate.

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