Life Together – Forgive One Another
Ephesians 4:25-32

(Expanded Sermon Notes)

There was this park where I grew up called Deer Lakes Park. It was home to the Wagman Observatory. Every so often, we would go out to the observatory to look at the stars. Growing up in the city, seeing the stars is not an easy thing with all of the light pollution. But driving 30 minutes outside the city to Wagman, all of a sudden, we could see the stars clearly. Not only that but there was always an astronomy club whose members were more than willing to let you look through their telescopes. What an experience it was! The thing about the stars is that they are always there, but they are only visible at night. Light and darkness are often seen as opposites, yet they are inseparable, much like love and truth in the Bible. Without light, darkness has no meaning, and without darkness, light cannot be fully understood. Again, consider the stars. It is only in the darkness that the stars—tiny points of light—can shine and be truly appreciated. Similarly, love and truth are intertwined in scripture. 1 Corinthians 13:6 says, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." Love without truth is empty, just as stars without darkness would be invisible. Truth without love can be harsh, just like darkness without the stars feels overwhelming. As the stars brighten the night sky, love illuminates truth, making both more beautiful and meaningful. This inseparable relationship reminds us that love and truth, like light and darkness, are dependent on each other. In other words, **truth and love cannot be separated.**

1. Truth & Love

a. What is truth?

i. Truth is – Accuracy over falsehoods.

ii. Paul puts a good deal of emphasis on truth. He uses the noun *alētheia* forty-seven times, and eight times he uses the related words: the adjectives *alēthēs* (“true,” “honest,” “genuine” four times) and *alēthinos* (“true,” “honest,” “dependable”), the verb *alētheuō* (“tell the truth,” “be truthful,” twice) and the adverb *alēthōs* (“truly,” “actually”). The noun *alētheia* occurs in every one of his letters except 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. He knows, of course, that truth is accuracy over against falsehood, and he can refer to speaking the truth just as we commonly do (Eph 4:25; 1 Tim 2:7; etc.). But more often he uses the word with a richer and fuller meaning.[1]

iii. Truth of Jesus – Paul is not saying that truth is many-sided and that he is concerned with that aspect of truth that we see in Jesus. **Rather he is saying that real truth, ultimate**

[1] Leon Morris, “Truth,” ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 954.

truth, is to be found in Jesus and that we find it nowhere else. It is a claim that the revelation of truth in Jesus is utterly reliable.[2]

1. Often Paul has the thought that people have not received the truth. **They suppress it in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18), exchange it for "the lie" (Rom 1:25).** They refuse to obey it (Rom 2:8; Gal 5:7; 2 Thess 2:12). They did not receive a love for it and so lost salvation (2 Thess 2:10). Sinners turn away from truth (2 Tim 4:4; Tit 1:14). They are bereft of the truth (1 Tim 6:5). God has revealed the truth, indeed has sent his Son to live it and to proclaim it, but sinful people have refused to listen.[3]

b. **Ethics – The way truth is expressed in our lives**.
   i. **What are ethics?** - Moral philosophy, or the division of philosophy that involves the study of how humans ought to live. Ethics focuses on questions of right and wrong, as well as the determination of the human good.[4]
   ii. English does not have a verb "to truth," but Paul uses such a verb, *alētheuō*, when he urges the Ephesians that " 'truthing' in love" they should grow in Christ in all things (Eph 4:15). We might understand this as "speaking the truth in love," **but more probably we should see truth as a quality of action as well as of speech**. Paul wants his converts to live the truth as well as to speak it.[5]

c. Do I trust God? → The key question for a skeptical mind.
   i. **Is God good and if so, do I trust that what he says is true, not is true, but will also lead to my flourishing**?
      1. Do I trust God's truth based on his character?
         a. Jesus corrects a mistaken interpretation that makes of Torah a burdensome yoke on human existence and recovers its true intent as an aid and guardian of life.[6]
         b. God's rules, precepts, and principles are not meant to be a burdensome yoke on us as human. They are to be the guardians of our physical and spiritual lives. We are to submit to them in the way we understand other rules lead to our flourishing. The key questions are do we know God's rules and do we trust God's character? Because we can know the rules and not trust his character. When we are in that position, we see the rules as oppressive and even dangerous or evil. But, when we trust his character (through relationship) we see his rules as what they are, established for our flourishing. I.e., Rules without relationship results in rebellion.

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[2] Leon Morris, "Truth," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 954.

[3] Leon Morris, "Truth," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 954.

[4] Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 35.

[5] Leon Morris, "Truth," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 954–955.

[6] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 96.

2. Transformation not just transaction. → When we trust God based on his known character, we are more willing to submit to God's precepts and experience the transformation that God desires for us to experience.

d. Pastoral note – Too often we confuse convictions and ultimate truth.

i. Convictions flow out of truth, but they are informed by personality and lived experience. They are valuable and valid, but they are not the same as an essential truth.

1. Truth is an eternal principle that does not change through time or context. However, the way it is applied in those contexts can look different.
2. A conviction is something that is strongly held which makes it different than an opinion.

ii. Examples of convictions vs truths.

1. **Theological** – The atonement of Christ: This is a theological truth that states the only grounds for salvation comes via the atoning death and sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. No other means is sufficient for our redemption. However, there are about 8 different theories of how the atonement precisely works. Those theories are convictions that are rooted in the eternal truth of the atonement.
2. **Political** – The sanctity of human life: This is the truth that because of the image of God in humanity all people are deserving of value and dignity. This dignity and value extends from conception to natural death. This truth is for all people, at all times, and is to extend across all cultures. This truth informs convictions on matters of care for the unborn and the elderly, immigration, school policy and educational philosophy, and care for those who are facing economic insecurity.
    a. I have believing friends that hold to the exact same truth on the sanctity of human life and have come to different convictions of how that truth is to be lived out. That is ok and my job is to not mix up conviction and truth

e. **What is love?** - A central virtue in most ethical traditions, one that denotes an attitude toward another involving both an affection for and a deep commitment to the other. In the Christian tradition, love (especially agape) is an expression of the essential nature of God, the central characterization of the relationship between God and humans, and the chief virtue that is to characterize Christians in their relationships to God and one another, as shaped by the indwelling Holy Spirit. **The connection between love and God's own character gives rise to the Christian focus on love as the fundamental characteristic of Christian discipleship and hence of Christian ethics**.[7]

i. Love is rooted in the character of God.

ii. In fact, many philosophers and sociologists think of love as the primary or highest virtue of an ethically centered life.

1. Consider the way we talk about care for the planet, the displaced, our political institutions, and even justice itself. All of these are paired with love as the central value. I.e., If you love this, then you will…

iii. **Biblically** – Love is exclusively tied up with the character and nature of God. [8]

1. Benevolence, Grace, Mercy, Persistence

a. When we think in terms of God's moral attributes, perhaps what comes first to mind is the cluster of attributes we are here classifying as love.

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[7] Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 72.

[8] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 266.

Many regard it as the basic attribute, the very nature or definition of God. The basic dimensions of God's love to us are (1) benevolence, (2) grace, (3) mercy, and (4) persistence.

iv. Love is – A working definition for our time this morning.

1. **Our working definition - Love is a persistent concern for someone's greatest good and the willingness to serve them toward that end**.

f. Discipleship is the process of reordering disordered love.

i. How do we see this in the passage?

1. We have heard Paul talk about putting off the old disordered self and its desires.
    a. I.e., What we loved before, we no longer love. What we were captivated by before, we are no longer captivated by.

ii. What loves need to be reordered in my life?

1. This needs to be a slow reflection and not a quick reaction.
2. There are many things that are good gifts from God or fine convictions that can slowly become more than they ought to in our lives.

2. Forgiveness

a. **Forgiveness begins with putting off your old self. - This is a continual process**. → To have God's promise is to lay aside the old and to put on the new (vv. 22–23). It means: become what you are! and not what you are not! **But to become what we already are is a continual task for anyone, something we must *call to mind* again and again as long as we live.** Therefore, admonition is necessary: be renewed in your *thinking* by the Spirit (v. 23).

i. This is not new in Paul's thought process in this letter or in his writings in general.
ii. Here in vv. 25-32, Paul once again defines what the normal Christian life is.

b. Our new selves keep the end in mind. (4:32)

i. The end we think of in this passage is not just our end, but it is the end of the other person, where they are able to experience their greatest good. Their greatest good, just like us, is found exclusively in Christ Jesus.

1. Another way of saying this is that formation in the way of Jesus is what we're after.

ii. The eradication of evil words and actions depends ultimately on the purification of the thought life. So speaking positively, the apostle says, *be kind to one another, tenderhearted* … The parallel Colossians 3:12 says, 'Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience.' [9]

iii. This means that when we speak the truth, we are not just aiming to be proved right in that moment. Instead, we are aiming at the development of the other person (and ourselves) into the image of Jesus.

1. Paul reminds us here of what our end is to be by what we have already experienced in Christ.
2. As we've said in this series before, when you look like Jesus you will bear fruit that makes that known.

c. Let's give some definition to forgiveness. (v. 31)

i. **<u>Is not</u>** ignoring wrongs or injustices.

[9] Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 143.

1. One of the most important things that we need to clear up when it comes to forgiveness is that forgiveness is not some blanket call to "move on and forget it." - Too often we think that forgiveness is the end and we are instantly reconciled to the other person. Or that we are not supposed to ignore the wrong, hurt, or injustice that happened and required forgiveness.

ii. Is putting away bitterness, wrath, & anger.

1. A key aspect in forgiveness is the willingness to not hold something against another person. That is, the wrong is recognized and has appropriate consequences, but bitterness is not allowed to grow in the heart of the one who forgives through the commitment to release anger and walk in peace.
2. Tim Keller talks about it this way. - When someone seriously wrongs you, it incurs an emotional and moral "debt" or liability. If you do not forgive, you are left with only two options: either make the perpetrator suffer through retaliation and payback, or refuse revenge and absorb the cost yourself. Without forgiveness, the internal compulsion to make the other person pay festers into long-term resentment.[10]

iii. Is speaking without malice, slander, or repetition to poison a reputation.

1. When we don't give the seed of bitterness a place to take root in our hearts and minds, we make room for being able to speak well of someone who hurt us. Again, this isn't some call to gloss over the past, but it is the commitment to not exact revenge with our words.
2. Consider Bryan Chappell's thoughts on this section – ""First, we have an *explanation* of forgiveness that is very important. Occasionally you hear Christians struggle over whether they need to forgive if someone who has sinned against them has not yet repented or repented well enough. The problem with such an approach is that it confuses pardon and forgiveness. This passage places forgiveness in the context of putting malice aside: "Get rid of … every form of malice …, forgiving each other" (Eph. 4:31d, 32). One does not have to remove all consequences for sin (i.e., to pardon) in order to forgive. It may be just and necessary for an offender to suffer consequences for wrong, but the motive of the one imposing or requiring the consequences cannot be malicious. We are not permitted to desire the ultimate harm of the offender. The gospel always provides hope, always seeks restoration. Even when the criminal is sentenced, and we properly rejoice to see justice done, the Christian also desires to see the offender recognize the sin, repent, and know spiritual restoration. Forgiveness does not require pardon from consequences; it requires an absence of malice (i.e., no desire for the person's spiritual harm) even in the application of those consequences. We may well desire justice, but desires for personal revenge or spiritual damage are not our right as Christians."[11]

d. Finally, what we give away as Christians is always rooted in what we've already received from God in Christ Jesus.

i. Paul ties the so what section of this passage to our experience of the gospel. This isn't random or abstract. It is the center and norm of what we are to do each and every day.

ii. Consider this progression -

[10] Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* (New York: Viking, 2022), 115.

[11] Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 231–32.

1. Forgiveness is something I <u>received</u>.
    a. You did not earn God's love and forgiveness. He gave it to you as a gift of grace.
2. What I've received motivates me for what I am to <u>give.</u>
    a. Because I've received such a lavish gift from God, I am now motivated to give the very same thing away.
3. What I give to others declares what my <u>hope</u> and <u>identity</u> are truly in.
    a. When I give to others what I've already received from God, it is the most powerful and profound defense of the faith. It shows that Jesus is truly in the business of changing lives.