

Gone So Quickly

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Colossians 3: 12-17--Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 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. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Well, it's done, finished, over, completed. Christmas for 2009 has come and gone, and gone so quickly. Did it really happen? Whew! Take a breath; relax a bit until people start reminding you that New Year's Eve is approaching. "What is your New Year's resolution?" Oh please, don't even start.

The text from Colossians today addresses how we are to live in community with unity. We are to be dressed and outfitted with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Those are all good and virtuous ways for us to live. But I think I like the text better when I add the word "for others" in the mix. If I make this scripture personal, if I make this scripture an admonition and prayer for me, interjecting my name into the text, I am caught up short. "Jerry, clothe yourself in **compassion** (for others) in **kindness** (for others) in **humility** (toward others) in **gentleness** (to others) and in **patience** (to others).

This congregation over the holidays has been involved in a variety of outreach and compassionate ministries. Some of which are depicted on your bulletin cover. These ways of living with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience are seen frequently at Christmas, but what about the rest of the year?

Did you have opportunity to get any of your prayers for kindness, compassion, humility, and gentleness answered while standing in line at the post office, Wal-mart or Toys R Us? You know you prayed for it. How did you do it? "Lord give me **patience**." Then you had a chance to practice patience in the slowest checkout lane in the store, right? "Lord give me kindness." How did you do when confronted with the stressed out checkout clerk who is rude?

For some people, the days after Christmas are represented in a dried out tree, ornaments and stockings that need to get packed away. Piles of torn up wrapping paper and empty boxes are all the reminders that we have of a holiday that has gone so quickly.

We talk about losing Christmas pounds and such at this time of year.

How many of you have lost something other than weight before, like car keys or your glasses? Ever had your baggage get lost? You show up at the airport baggage carousel and play suitcase roulette.

“Will it be there or not? I saw them put it on the plane. Where did it go? Dallas to Lubbock. How could it not be here? And it is in Cleveland? Oh man.”

I had some bags not make the trip with me some years ago. I stood rooted to the spot near the carousel hoping beyond hope that my bag would show up miraculously with some of the other suitcase orphans riding alone, round and round. “If I stare hard enough the bag will appear.” Nope.

Of course the lost luggage shows up with one day left on vacation. Go figure. Airlines’ losing your luggage is an aggravating, annoying, patience testing experience. Savvy travelers carry valuables, crucial papers and medicine along with a toothbrush, socks, and underwear in a separate carry on. It’s just too risky not to.

But sometime in the next four days, we should all make a concerted effort to “lose our luggage.” What? Lose your luggage. Most of us are weighted down with pounds and pounds of excess baggage. Maybe more than we realize.

- How many extra pounds of grudges are you lugging around with you?
- How many handbags of animosity?
- How many carry on bags of unrelenting resentment?
- How many rolling bags packed with revenge?

Many of us feel compelled to make New Year’s resolutions aided by a healthy helping of black-eyed peas for good luck. We bring our New Year’s resolutions into 2010 with great optimism. But we so often fail to stop and consider that load of baggage that we already have packed and ready to go. Church, the worst thing we can do is say, “Well, Christmas came and went so quickly,” and then make a move to the New Year with these overstuffed soft sided and hard sided bags bursting and crammed and jammed with old unrelenting grudges.

In the epistle today, Paul urges the Colossians to so thoroughly live for Christ that they can finally put to death the old ways of living, to ditch the past bad habits, to shed the unwanted attitudes and agendas.

I like this text because it spells the situation out for you, for me. It is quite clear. **Specific words addressing our specific needs** to enable us to achieve our goal of getting rid of excess baggage and junk.

“Clothe” yourself with **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.**” This is not something you just take in and sit on like it’s your wallet. Note these admonitions require activity. It requires us to “do something.” Just like when Paul counsels the Colossians in verse 13, “forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you.”

This call to forgiveness that Paul declares is not really a request. It is not optional. Forgiveness is not something that we as Christians should extend to one another just because it’s the “nice” thing to do, or because it’ll promote peace in the body of Christ. Paul makes the connection between **divine forgiveness** and **human acts of forgiveness** a bit more explicit than that. Paul insists that ... “as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.”

Several years ago I was living in Ohio, and had opportunity to spend time in Amish country. The Amish are peace loving, hard working, Christian people. If you recall 3 years ago, there was a man, Charles Roberts IV, who shot to death 5 Amish children at a school in Pennsylvania.

On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, "We must not think evil of this man." Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God." Jack Meyer, a member of the Brethren community living near the Amish in Lancaster County, explained: "I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts."

A family spokesman for the shooter said an Amish neighbor comforted the Roberts family hours after the shooting and extended forgiveness to them. Amish community members visited and comforted Roberts' widow, parents, and parents-in-law. One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father in his arms, reportedly for as long as an hour, to comfort him. The Amish have also set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter.

Forgiveness does not undo the act. But forgiveness does begin a way for God's grace to move through us in a painful horrible situation.

Forgiveness is not something we owe each other. Forgiveness is not something we can truly offer each other. We have the capacity for forgiveness *only* because God has forgiven us...first. Without first experiencing God's forgiveness in our lives, we have nothing to offer anyone else. Any act of forgiveness we have extended to another, becomes an act of worship to God. When I acknowledge God's forgiveness for me, and extend this divine gift of forgiveness to others, it is an act of worship.

God knows our hearts, and knows that as imperfect fallible humans. it is hard for us to turn loose of our carefully tended, well guarded, over stuffed bags of resentments and old hurts. Each of us has a name or a face in our heads of an individual that we simply struggle with being able to forgive. Some people say, "but you don't know what he/she did to me."

- How do you forgive the one who abused you?
- How do you forgive the ex spouse who maligns you?
- How do you forgive the thief that took memories from you?
- How do you forgive one who took a loved ones life?
- How do we forgive a company that used you up, and then cut you loose?
- How do you forgive the parent who abandoned you?
- How do you forgive the child who destroys us?
- How do we forgive hatred, stupidity, bigotry, greed, war, waste, poverty, and ignoring the needs of the world?

We can't. We can't. You have heard the old adage, "Don't get mad, get ...even," or "don't get even, get it all."

Hear me, church, forgiveness is NOT, forgetting. Forgiveness is **choosing** to not actively remember the hurt in some instances.

It is not saying to the other party, “Oh that’s okay, I forgive you.” Rather it is saying, “I’m all right, and I am willing to let God deal with whether you’re okay.”

Forgiveness is NOT saying, “I don’t; feel the pain anymore.” Rather it is saying, “I do not feel the need to hold on to your involvement in my pain anymore.”

My high school friend Hector’s dad was killed in a senseless daylight robbery at a gas station in South Texas a few years ago. I visited with Hector at length about the sentencing of the two men who murdered his dad. Hector, you see, is a high powered criminal attorney. One who has tried and won many capital cases. Yet Hector said that he was pleading not for a death sentence for the two men, but for life in prison sentences. Hector told me that his dad was gone, but that as a Christian, Hector wanted to offer forgiveness to these two men. Both men were convicted of murder, and after several years have accepted Christ as Lord and savior through prison ministry. Hector like the Amish parents and all of us who have been hurt, **remember**; but for us to be healthy, we must forgive.

It is God who forgives us, and we must depend on God to take our baggage and sent it to a destination that will never find us again.

Can we really sabotage a despised coworker’s computer in the name of Jesus?

Can we honestly swear to get even with the liar or cheat in the name of Jesus?

Paul’s letter to the Colossians offers us this advice. “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

The Christmas holiday is gone so quickly, and now we approach the New Year, and we clothe ourselves in Christian compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Live all of your life, in all aspects, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.