

Becoming Like Christ

Lesson 7: Kindness and Goodness in Action -- Ephesians 4:32

Picture a debt so large you could never repay it, the kind that does not shrink no matter how hard you work, the kind that follows you to bed at night and is waiting for you again in the morning. Now picture a creditor with every legal right to ruin you, holding the paper in his hand, and watching as he quietly tears it in two. The relief of that moment, the sudden lightness, the breath you did not know you were holding, is the closest most of us come to understanding what God has done for us in Christ. And it is the soil out of which kindness grows.

Paul has spent the first half of his letter to the Ephesians telling them what God has done. He chose them, redeemed them, made them alive when they were dead in sin, and brought near those who were once far off, all by grace through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1–2). Now, in the second half, he turns to how such people ought to live. The whole flow of chapter four is the stripping off of an old way of life and the putting on of a new one, like a person taking off filthy work clothes and dressing in something clean. And right at the end of that chapter, Paul lands on three words that gather the whole new wardrobe into a single picture: kind, tenderhearted, forgiving.

We tend to think of kindness as a minor virtue, the sort of thing we praise in a friendly cashier or a patient grandmother, pleasant but not weighty. Paul will not let us keep it small. He sets kindness directly beside the cross. Be kind to one another, he says, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32). The standard is not how we feel on a good day, nor the ordinary decency of getting along. The standard is Calvary. The kindness Paul has in mind is the costly, durable, forgiving goodness that God Himself showed to us when we deserved the opposite.

So this lesson asks a searching question: are we becoming the kind of people through whom God's kindness flows to others, or are we receiving His forgiveness with one hand while clenching the other into a fist? Paul knows that the verse just before this one names the things that crowd kindness out, the bitterness, the anger, the slander we nurse against each other (Ephesians 4:31). And the verses just after call us higher still, to walk in love and imitate God as His children (Ephesians 5:1–2). Read this single verse slowly, and let it do its work. It tells us what to put away, what to put on, and the one great reason for both.

Group Discussion: Most people, including most Christians, would agree that we should be kind and forgiving toward one another. Yet Paul does not simply tell us to be nice; he grounds our kindness in something specific, the way God in Christ forgave us. Why does that grounding matter? How might Christian kindness look different from the ordinary friendliness that anyone, believer or not, might show?

Personal Reflection: Think of a person you find it genuinely hard to be kind toward right now, perhaps someone who has wronged you or simply someone who wears on you. When you bring that relationship into the light of Ephesians 4:32, what do you notice in your own heart? Where do you most need God to soften you?

Read Ephesians 4:32

Study Questions

1. Paul commands us to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, and then gives the reason: as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32). What does it tell us about the very nature of the Christian life that our kindness toward others is meant to flow from, and to look like, God's kindness toward us in Christ?
2. Kindness sounds easy until we picture the particular people Paul has in mind when he says one another, the fellow believer who irritates us, the family member who has hurt us, the person who has not changed. Who is the hardest person for you to be kind to right now, and what makes it so hard? What would real kindness, not mere politeness, actually require of you toward that person?
3. Just before this verse Paul says to put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander, along with all malice (Ephesians 4:31). Why does Paul insist that these things be put away before, or alongside, putting on kindness? What does this teach us about the relationship between rooting out sin and growing in Christlike character?
4. Bitterness rarely announces itself; it hides under the names of being hurt, being right, or simply being honest. Is there a bitterness or a grudge you have been quietly nursing, perhaps for so long it feels like part of you? What would it look like this week to begin putting it away rather than rehearsing it?

5. Paul uses the word tenderhearted, a picture of inward compassion, the heart moved with mercy toward another (Ephesians 4:32). Why is kindness more than outward behavior, and how does the gospel actually change the heart and not just the hands? Why can a person behave politely while remaining hard inside, and what does God want instead?
6. Think of someone whose situation, if you are honest, has left you cold rather than moved, someone whose troubles you have explained away or hardened yourself against. What would it mean to ask God to give you a tender heart toward that person? What is one concrete, costly act of goodness you could do for someone this week, not because they have earned it, but because God has been good to you?
7. Paul tells us to forgive one another, and the standard he gives is the way God in Christ forgave us. What does the forgiveness God extends to us in Christ actually involve, and how is it meant to shape the way we forgive each other? How is this kind of forgiveness different from merely overlooking an offense or saying that it did not matter?
8. Forgiveness is often hardest not in theory but in the specific wound that still aches. Is there someone you know you need to forgive, and have not? What has held you back, the fear that forgiving means excusing, the desire to see them pay, the sheer pain of it? What would taking one step toward forgiveness look like for you?
9. Paul roots all of this in five words that carry the weight of the whole gospel: as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32). On what basis did God forgive us, and why was the cross of Christ necessary for that forgiveness to be just and real? And how does Scripture teach us to understand the order here, that we forgive others because we have already been forgiven in Christ, rather than forgiving others in order to earn God's forgiveness?

10. Look back across the whole movement of this passage: putting away bitterness and malice (4:31), putting on kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness (4:32), and walking in love as imitators of God, as Christ loved us and gave Himself for us (5:1–2). Name one specific way you sense Jesus wanting to form His own kindness and forgiveness in you through this lesson, and one concrete step you will take this week to begin living it out.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Colossians 3:12–13, putting on compassion and kindness and forgiving as the Lord forgave us; Matthew 18:21–35, the parable of the unforgiving servant who was forgiven a great debt; Luke 6:35–36, loving enemies and being merciful as our Father is merciful; Romans 2:4, God’s kindness meant to lead us to repentance; Galatians 5:22–23, kindness and goodness as fruit of the Spirit.