

One Another, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Be Kind and Forgive One Another

Ephesians 4:29–32

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson handles a tender and frequently misunderstood subject, so what is doctrinally at stake is significant. Ephesians 4:29–32 binds three things tightly together: how Christians speak, how the Holy Spirit relates to us, and how we forgive one another. Your central doctrinal task is to present forgiveness rightly. Paul grounds our forgiving entirely in God's prior forgiving: "forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Christian forgiveness is not a virtue we summon out of our own goodness; it is the overflow of a debt already canceled at the cross. Help students see that the gospel is both the pattern and the power. We forgive because we have been forgiven, and only people stunned by grace can forgive like this.

At the same time, guard against a common distortion. To forgive as God forgave is not to pretend that sin is trivial, that repentance does not matter, or that reconciliation is unimportant. God's own forgiveness, while free and undeserved, is extended to those who hear the gospel, believe, repent, confess Christ, and are baptized into him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4), and it calls the forgiven to ongoing repentance and faithful living. So forgiveness and the call to repentance and reconciliation belong together, not in conflict. Teach students to release bitterness fully and from the heart while still longing for, and where possible pursuing, true reconciliation and a sin genuinely turned from. Sentimentality that waves sin away and hardness that refuses to forgive are both failures of the gospel.

A second careful point is the sealing of the Spirit in verse 30. The Holy Spirit is God's mark of ownership and his pledge of the inheritance to come, a glorious assurance. But notice that this very assurance comes wrapped in a warning: do not grieve him. So teach the seal of the Spirit as God's gracious pledge to faithful Christians, without drifting into the false comfort of "once saved, always saved." Scripture warns the sealed people of God against grieving the Spirit, against bitterness, and against falling away (Hebrews 3:12–14). Your formational aim is a congregation of gentle tongues and soft hearts, people whose speech builds up and whose grudges have been laid down at the foot of the cross.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). What does it tell us about God's purpose for human speech that the standard is not merely "avoid the bad" but "build up and give grace"?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by noticing that Paul sets a remarkably high bar. He does not simply say, “Stop saying ugly things,” though that is included. He says our words should be good for building up, fit for the occasion, and a means of grace to the hearer. The word translated “corrupting” pictures something rotten, like spoiled fruit or rancid food. Paul wants no rottenness coming out of a Christian’s mouth, but he wants more than mere absence; he wants speech that feeds and strengthens others.

Help students see that this reveals God’s positive design for speech. We are made in the image of a God who speaks, who creates and blesses with his word, and whose Son is called the Word. Our tongues were given to build, to encourage, to tell the truth in love, and to carry grace from one heart to another. To use them only to vent, to wound, or to win arguments is to waste a holy gift. The standard “that it may give grace to those who hear” is stunning: our ordinary sentences are meant to be little channels of God’s kindness.

Draw the connection to the surrounding chapter. Paul has just described the church as a body being built up in love as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:15–16). Our speech is one of the chief tools of that building. Careless words tear down what the Lord is constructing. Gracious words are the mortar of a healthy congregation. The question is not merely “Was that wrong to say?” but “Did that build my brother up?”

Apply it gently and concretely. Most of us measure our speech by a low standard: did I avoid cursing, did I avoid an outright lie. Paul raises the bar to a daily, practical love. Encourage students to begin asking, before they speak, whether their words fit the occasion and will hand grace to the person listening. That single question, asked honestly, would transform most homes and most congregations.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s positive design for speech as a means of building up and giving grace, not merely avoiding evil (Ephesians 4:29)
- The tongue’s power to bless or to destroy within the body (James 3:5–10; Proverbs 18:21)
- Edifying speech as part of how Christ builds up his church (Ephesians 4:15–16)
- Truth spoken in love, rather than truth weaponized or love that flatters (Ephesians 4:15)
- The renewed mouth as evidence of the new self put on in Christ (Ephesians 4:22–24)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between speech that merely avoids sin and speech that actively gives grace?
- How would your conversations change if you asked, before speaking, “Will this build this person up?”
- Where has someone’s well-timed word been a means of God’s grace to you?

Question 2

Student Question:

Replay your conversations from the past week, including the ones in private and online. Where did your words tear down rather than build up? Name one specific moment you wish you could take back.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the goal is honest specificity rather than vague guilt. Most of us can recall a sharp text message, a cutting remark, a piece of gossip passed along, or a tone of voice that wounded someone at home. Encourage students to resist generalities like “I could be kinder” and instead name an actual moment, an actual person, actual words.

Press on the private and online realm in particular. Much corrupting talk happens where we feel unobserved: in the family kitchen, in a group chat, in a comment typed quickly in frustration. We often hold our public speech to a higher standard than our private speech, yet God hears both, and the people closest to us absorb the most. The screen can make cruelty feel costless. It is not.

Keep the tone hopeful and gospel-shaped. The point of this honest look is not to crush students but to drive them back to the grace that forgives careless words and the Spirit who reshapes the tongue. Invite them to consider whether an apology is owed, and to picture how the same situation could be met next time with words that build up. Conviction that ends in Christ leads to change, not despair.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of careless and private words before God (Matthew 12:36)
- The heart as the source of our speech, so that the tongue reveals what is within (Luke 6:45)
- Confession and repentance as the path back when our words have wounded (1 John 1:9)
- The need to make things right with those our words have hurt (Matthew 5:23–24)

Discussion Prompts

- Why do we so often hold our private and online words to a lower standard than our public ones?
- Is there someone you owe an apology for words spoken this week? What would it take to give it?
- What is one habit of speech you would most like the Lord to retrain in you?

Question 3

Student Question:

Verse 30 warns, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” What does it mean that the Holy Spirit can be grieved, and what does that teach us about how God regards the way we treat one another?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Slow down and let the weight of this verse land. Tucked in the middle of practical instructions about speech and temper is a profound truth: the Holy Spirit is a Person, not a force or an influence, and Persons can be grieved. To grieve someone is to cause them sorrow by wounding a relationship of love. Paul says that when Christians speak corruptly and harbor bitterness, they bring sorrow to the very Spirit of God who dwells in them.

Explain the imagery of the seal. In the ancient world a seal marked ownership and guaranteed authenticity, like a signet pressed into wax. To say believers are “sealed” with the Spirit is to say God has marked us as his own and pledged us toward “the day of redemption,” the final inheritance. This is a glorious assurance for the faithful. The Spirit within us is God’s down payment on the world to come (Ephesians 1:13–14).

Now hold the assurance and the warning together, because Paul does. The same Spirit who seals us can be grieved by us. This guards us from two errors. It guards against treating sin lightly, as though once we are God’s nothing we do matters. And it guards against thinking our conflicts are merely human. When a Christian slanders a brother or nurses a grudge, this is not a private quarrel; it grieves the Spirit of the living God who indwells the church. That should sober us deeply.

Be careful here on doctrine. The seal is God’s faithful pledge, but it is not an unconditional guarantee that ignores how we live. Scripture repeatedly warns the people of God not to grieve, quench, or resist the Spirit, and warns Christians not to fall away through an unbelieving, hardened heart (Hebrews 3:12–14). So teach the seal as a real and precious assurance to those who remain faithful, while taking the warning of verse 30 with full seriousness. God’s nearness in the Spirit raises the stakes of how we treat each other; it does not lower them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Holy Spirit as a divine Person who can be grieved, not an impersonal force (Ephesians 4:30; Isaiah 63:10)
- The Spirit’s indwelling of the Christian, given in obedience to the gospel (Acts 2:38; Acts 5:32)
- The sealing of the Spirit as God’s mark of ownership and pledge of the inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14; 2 Corinthians 1:22)
- The warning against grieving, quenching, or resisting the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19; Acts 7:51)
- The seal as assurance for the faithful, not a license to sin or a guarantee that ignores faithfulness (Hebrews 3:12–14)

- Conflict and bitterness among Christians as matters that touch God himself, not merely human relationships

Discussion Prompts

- What changes when you realize that grieving a brother also grieves the Spirit who dwells in you?
- How is the sealing of the Spirit both a great comfort and a solemn responsibility?
- Why is it important to hold the assurance of verse 30 together with its warning, rather than choosing one?

Question 4

Student Question:

When you let bitterness or a sharp tongue have its way, do you think of it as something that grieves God himself, or only as a small personal failing? How would taking verse 30 seriously change the way you guard your heart and mouth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses verse 30 from doctrine into daily vigilance. Most of us file our irritability and our cutting words under “minor flaws,” the kind of thing we excuse with “that’s just how I am.” Paul will not let us. He attaches the highest possible stakes to these everyday sins: they grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Help students feel the gap between how lightly we treat our temper and how seriously God does.

Draw out the practical effect of taking this seriously. If I knew that a guest I deeply loved was sitting in my living room, I would guard my words. Paul says something greater is true: the Spirit of God himself dwells in me and in the brother I am tempted to wound. That awareness, kept alive, becomes a quiet check on the heart. It slows the angry reply, softens the bitter thought, and reminds me that I am never merely venting; I am living in the presence of God.

Keep it hopeful and concrete. The aim is not a paralyzing scrupulosity over every word but a tender conscience that genuinely wants to please the indwelling Spirit. Encourage students to name the specific situation where their tongue or temper most regularly runs loose, and to invite the Spirit’s help precisely there. Growth comes not by gritted teeth alone but by walking in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 25).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of “small” sins of speech and temper before a holy God (Matthew 12:36)
- Living consciously in the presence of the indwelling Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19)
- Walking by the Spirit as the means of overcoming the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:16–25)
- A tender conscience as a mark of spiritual health, not weakness (Psalm 139:23–24)

Discussion Prompts

- What sins of temper or tongue do you most easily excuse as “just how I am”?
- How might remembering the indwelling Spirit slow your next angry or bitter reply?
- Where do you most need to ask the Spirit’s help to guard your heart and mouth this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul commands us to “put away” bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice (verse 31). Why do you think he lists so many forms, and how are these vices connected to one another in the human heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk through Paul’s list slowly, because each word matters. Bitterness is a settled, inward resentment, a wound that has soured. Wrath is the hot flash of rage; anger is the longer-burning, simmering kind. Clamor is the shouting and uproar that breaks out when anger boils over. Slander is the speech that tears down another’s reputation, and malice is the underlying ill will that wishes another harm. Paul is mapping the whole pathway of a heart gone wrong.

Help students see how these vices feed one another. Notice the progression. It often begins quietly with bitterness nursed in the heart. That inward resentment heats into anger and flashes into wrath. Wrath spills out in clamor and explodes into slander. And beneath it all sits malice, the deep-down desire for the other person’s hurt. Paul lists them together because they are not six separate problems but one diseased root sending up many shoots. Deal only with the shouting and you leave the bitter root alive.

Note the word “all.” Paul says, “Let all bitterness... be put away from you, along with all malice.” There is a thoroughness here. He is not asking us to manage these things or keep them within polite limits. He is asking us to take them off entirely, like a filthy garment, because they belong to the old self that died with Christ. This is the language of decisive break, not gradual moderation.

Apply it to congregational life honestly. Few things wreck a church family more quietly and thoroughly than nursed bitterness and loose, slanderous tongues. A congregation can hold sound doctrine and still be poisoned by these vices working underground. Help students see that putting away bitterness is not optional spiritual fine-tuning; it is essential to the health of the body and the witness of the church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The interconnected nature of sins of the heart and tongue, growing from a common root (Ephesians 4:31)

- Bitterness as a root that defiles many if left untended (Hebrews 12:15)
- The decisive “putting off” of the old self and its vices in Christ (Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:8)
- The destructive power of slander and an uncontrolled tongue in the body (James 3:6; Proverbs 16:28)
- The thoroughness of Paul’s “all,” calling for a clean break rather than mere moderation

Discussion Prompts

- How have you seen bitterness, if left unchecked, grow into anger, clamor, and slander?
- Why is it not enough to control the outward shouting if the inward bitterness remains?
- What does it mean to “put away” these vices decisively rather than simply manage them?

Question 6

Student Question:

Which item on Paul’s list in verse 31 has the strongest grip on you right now, bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, or malice? What feeds it, and what would it look like to genuinely put it away?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to stop treating verse 31 as a description of other people and locate themselves in it. Encourage real honesty. One person wrestles most with a slow, settled bitterness toward someone who wronged them years ago. Another with a quick temper that flares and wounds. Another with a habit of slander dressed up as “just sharing a concern.” Help them name their own besetting vice without flinching.

Move to the question of what feeds it. Sins of the heart are usually fed by something: replaying the offense, keeping company with others who stoke the resentment, rehearsing our case against the person, or simply refusing to forgive. Help students trace the fuel line. Often we keep our bitterness alive by feeding it, then complain that it will not die. Identifying the fuel is the first step to cutting it off.

Then turn toward the put-away. To put away a vice is not merely to suppress it but to replace it, as the next verse makes clear: kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness take its place. Encourage students to pair the negative with the positive. The sharp tongue is put away by deliberately speaking words that build up; the grudge is put away by handing it to God and praying for the offender. Keep it concrete, specific, and Christ-dependent.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest self-examination as a healthy part of the Christian walk (2 Corinthians 13:5)
- The way sin is fed and starved by what we dwell on and rehearse (Philippians 4:8)

- Putting off a vice by putting on its opposite virtue (Ephesians 4:31–32)
- Dependence on Christ and his Spirit, not willpower alone, to be free of besetting sin (Galatians 5:22–23)

Discussion Prompts

- Which of these vices most often gets a foothold in you, and how long has it lived there?
- What are you doing, perhaps without realizing it, that keeps feeding it?
- What positive virtue could you deliberately put on this week in its place?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul roots our forgiving in God's forgiving: "forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (verse 32). How does the way God forgave us in Christ become both the pattern and the power for the way we are to forgive each other?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves to the positive heart of the passage, so give it room. Paul does not leave us merely emptied of bitterness; he fills the space with kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness. And he anchors all of it in one clause: "as God in Christ forgave you." This is the same logic we met in the upper room. The measure of our love and forgiveness is not the offense, not the offender's worthiness, but the way God himself has dealt with us.

Show how God's forgiveness is the pattern. Consider how God forgave us in Christ. He forgave at enormous cost, through the blood of his Son. He forgave a debt we could never repay. He forgave while we were still sinners and enemies (Romans 5:8, 10). He forgave fully, removing our sins as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). That is the template laid over our forgiving of one another. Our forgiveness is to be costly, complete, and freely given, not a grudging, partial, score-keeping pardon.

Then show how it is also the power. We do not generate this kind of forgiveness from our own reserves of goodness. We forgive because we have first been forgiven. The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–35) makes the point unforgettable: the servant forgiven an unpayable fortune turns and throttles a fellow servant over pocket change, and the Lord is appalled. When we refuse to forgive, we have forgotten the size of our own canceled debt. Remembering it is what melts our hardness and frees our hands.

Bring it home tenderly. The Christian who finds forgiveness impossibly hard is often standing too far from the cross. The nearer we draw to the immensity of what we have been forgiven, the more natural it becomes to release what others owe us. Help students see that growing in forgiveness is finally a matter of growing in gratitude for grace. Forgiven people forgive.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's forgiveness in Christ as the pattern for our forgiveness of one another (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13)
- The costliness of God's forgiveness, secured through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7)
- Forgiveness extended to us while we were still sinners and enemies (Romans 5:8–10)
- The parable of the unforgiving servant linking our forgiving to the debt we were forgiven (Matthew 18:21–35)
- Gratitude for grace as the wellspring that makes Christlike forgiveness possible

Discussion Prompts

- What features of the way God forgave you should shape the way you forgive others?
- How does forgetting the size of your own forgiven debt make you hard toward others?
- Whom do you find hard to forgive, and how does the cross change the way you see that debt?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think of someone who has wronged you. How does remembering the size of the debt God forgave you change the way you feel about the debt you are being asked to release?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the doctrine of the previous one and lays it against a real face. Encourage students to bring to mind an actual person who has wronged them, not a hypothetical. The exercise is to set two debts side by side: the debt that person owes you, and the debt you owed God. The parable of Matthew 18 is the lens. The contrast between the two is meant to be jarring.

Help students do the math honestly. The wrongs others do us are real and can be deep; we should not pretend otherwise. Yet held next to the mountain of our own sin against a holy God, all of it forgiven freely in Christ, the proportion shifts. The unforgiving servant's mistake was not that his fellow servant owed him nothing; it was that he forgot what he himself had been forgiven. We make the same mistake whenever we nurse a grudge.

Be pastorally careful here, especially with those who have suffered serious harm. Forgiveness does not mean the wrong did not matter or that consequences and safety are irrelevant. It means we release our claim to revenge and bitterness, entrusting justice to God (Romans 12:19), because we ourselves have been shown undeserved mercy. Invite students to take one honest step toward releasing a specific person, even if the relationship itself remains complicated.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The disproportion between our debt to God and others' debts to us (Matthew 18:23–33)
- Forgiveness as releasing our claim to revenge, leaving justice to God (Romans 12:17–21)
- Mercy received as the ground of mercy extended (Matthew 5:7; James 2:13)
- Forgiveness that is real even when full reconciliation is not yet possible

Discussion Prompts

- When you set the wrong done to you beside your own forgiven debt, how does the picture change?
- What does it mean to release a grudge to God rather than nurse it yourself?
- What is one honest step toward forgiving the person you brought to mind?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul says to forgive “as God in Christ forgave you.” God’s forgiveness is real and free, yet it is extended to those who hear the gospel, believe, repent, confess Christ, and are baptized into him, and it calls us to ongoing repentance and reconciliation. How do we forgive one another freely and from the heart without pretending that sin does not matter, that repentance is unnecessary, or that broken relationships need no healing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, so give it full room. The danger on one side is hardness: refusing to forgive, demanding our pound of flesh, keeping a ledger. The danger on the other side is a sentimental counterfeit that calls itself forgiveness while emptying sin of all seriousness, never longing for the offender’s repentance and never working toward reconciliation. Paul’s phrase “as God in Christ forgave you” cuts between both errors, because God’s own forgiveness is neither hard nor sentimental.

Show how God’s forgiveness takes sin with utter seriousness. The very phrase “in Christ” reminds us that our forgiveness cost the blood of the Son of God. God did not wave our sin away as though it were nothing; he dealt with it at the cross. And the forgiveness he offers is received by those who respond to the gospel: hearing the word, believing that Jesus is Lord and Christ, repenting of sin, confessing him, and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). Even after entering Christ, we are called to ongoing repentance and to walk in the light (1 John 1:7–9). God’s forgiveness and his call to repentance are not in tension; they belong together.

So apply this to our forgiving of one another, carefully. To forgive from the heart is to release bitterness and the desire for revenge fully and freely, refusing to let resentment rot inside us. This much we do whether or not the offender ever repents, just as Christ prayed for those who

crucified him. Yet forgiving from the heart does not require us to pretend the wrong was small, to deny that sin is serious, or to abandon the hope of repentance and reconciliation. Jesus himself holds these together: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). We long for, and where we can we gently pursue, a genuine turning and a healed relationship.

Help students feel the balance practically. Releasing bitterness is unconditional and immediate; full reconciliation may take time, truth-telling, and real repentance on both sides. A wife forgiving a betraying husband, for instance, releases her bitterness to God, yet rightly hopes for genuine repentance and rebuilt trust rather than a hollow truce. To collapse forgiveness into “just act as if nothing happened” actually cheapens the gospel it claims to imitate. To withhold forgiveness until the offender grovels enough betrays the gospel from the other side. The cross holds grace and seriousness together, and so must we.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s forgiveness as free and undeserved, yet received through the gospel response of faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27)
- The seriousness of sin shown precisely in the costly forgiveness purchased by Christ’s blood (Ephesians 1:7)
- The call to ongoing repentance and walking in the light even for the forgiven (1 John 1:7–9)
- Rebuke, repentance, and forgiveness held together rather than played against each other (Luke 17:3–4; Matthew 18:15–17)
- Releasing bitterness and the desire for revenge as something we extend freely, leaving justice to God (Romans 12:19)
- The difference between forgiveness (released from the heart) and full reconciliation (which may require repentance and time)
- The error of a sentimentality that denies sin’s seriousness and the opposite error of a hardness that refuses to forgive

Discussion Prompts

- How does the costliness of God’s forgiveness keep us from treating either sin or forgiveness lightly?
- What is the difference between releasing bitterness from your heart and fully restoring a broken relationship?
- Where are you tempted toward hardness that withholds forgiveness, or toward a sentimentality that ignores sin?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across Ephesians 4:29–32 as a whole: wholesome speech, a grieved or honored Spirit, the old vices put away, and Christlike kindness and forgiveness put on. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage, and what you will do about it this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole lesson into one concrete commitment. Resist letting it stay general. “I want to be kinder” is a wish, not a step. Help students name a specific person, a specific arena, and a specific action. The text offers several doors: a tongue to retrain, a grudge to release, a bitterness to put away, an act of kindness to offer.

Encourage them to connect their answer to whatever struck them most. For one student it will be verse 29 and a resolve to let their words build up at home. For another it will be verse 30 and a new seriousness about grieving the Spirit. For another it will be verse 32 and a specific person to forgive. Let the part of the passage that pressed hardest become the place of obedience.

Close by lifting their eyes to Christ. The aim of this study is not behavior modification but becoming like Jesus, who spoke grace, who is not easily provoked, and who forgave his executioners from the cross. Remind students that the same Lord who commands kindness and forgiveness supplies them by his Spirit and his ongoing work in us. Send them out not under a heavy load but with one clear step and a confident hope that Christ is forming them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Growing conformity to Christ, including his gracious speech and forgiving heart, as the goal of the Christian life (Romans 8:29)
- The Spirit’s work of producing kindness and self-control in the obedient believer (Galatians 5:22–23)
- Specific, personal obedience as the proper response to God’s word (James 1:22)
- Christ as both the pattern and the power of the kindness and forgiveness he commands

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of Ephesians 4:29–32 pressed on your heart most, and why?
- What is the one specific step (a word to speak, a grudge to release, a person to forgive) you will take, and when?
- How will you rely on the indwelling Spirit, rather than your own willpower, as you take it?