

**“MAINTAINING A SOFT HEART”**  
**(Ephesians 4:30-32)**

We’ve been talking the last several weeks about Christian transformation and how through Christ we put off our old self and our old way of living, put on our new self and a new way of living. When I think of transformation, an image that always comes to mind is *The Grinch That Stole Christmas*. You remember how the sinister-looking Grinch lives all by himself on a cliff overlooking the town of Whoville. While everyone in Whoville is cheerful, the Grinch is mean-spirited and cynical. No one knows exactly how the grinch got this way, but the people of Whoville say that he was born with a heart that was three sizes too small.

The Grinch has a special hatred for Christmas and at night he descends from his mountain home to the village of Whoville and steals every symbol of Christmas he can find – every Christmas tree, every decoration, and every gift. He even takes a candy cane from the fingers of little Cindy Lou Who as she sleeps. And the music plays in the background: “You’re a mean one, Mr. Grinch... your heart’s an empty hole, your brain is full of spiders, you have garlic in your soul... you have all the tender sweetness of a seasick crocodile, given the choice between the two I’d take the seasick crocodile!” The song is worth the whole show.

The next morning from atop his mountain dwelling, he expects to hear sounds of sadness in Whoville, but instead he hears singing. Their attitude, despite having lost everything, does something strange to the Grinch’s tiny heart. It suddenly grows three sizes as it expands through his chest, and the Grinch is transformed. He smiles, he pats his dog lovingly on the head, he goes back down to the village to return all the things he’s stolen, and the former hermit joins the citizens of Whoville for Christmas dinner.

What happens to the Grinch is a great visual picture of what happens when people are saved and born-again – they become brand-new creations in Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within them, and they are transformed from a life of sin to a life lived for God. There’s a tangible change that takes place in their thinking, their desires, and their behavior.

At the end of Ephesians 4 the Apostle Paul gives five very specific behaviors that should characterize every truly saved person. We are to put off lying and tell the truth – we are to control our anger so that it does not lead to sin – we are to put off stealing and work hard with our hands – we are not to speak unwholesome words but words that build up others according to their need. Now today we come to the last behavior that should characterize our life and – something that starts deep in the recesses of our hearts.

In verses 30-32 Paul writes, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

As we’ve seen with each of the previous commands, they are given not to burden us, but to bless us. Each of the five commands deal specifically with our relationships with others, and when we live out these commands our relationships in church, at home, and in the community flourish and thrive.

Prior to giving the fifth command in verse 31, Paul pauses in verse 30 to give the supreme motivation for obeying all five commands... “*Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*” We’ve talked many times about how when you’re born again the Holy Spirit of God enters your life and your body becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit.

The presence of the Holy Spirit working in your life authenticates that you belong to God. When you begin speaking truthfully, when you control your anger, when you stop stealing, and speak wholesome words – all these are signs that something supernatural is taking place in you.

The presence of the Holy Spirit also gives you assurance that that your salvation is eternally secure and that God will see you through all the way to heaven. Paul says you are sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption. This is referring to the day when you're in heaven and your redemption is made complete, when you are resurrected to a new body and stand perfect before God. The presence of the Holy Spirit is the guarantee that God will see you all the way through this life to heaven.

One of the keys to living the Christian life is being aware of the Holy Spirit's presence. We tend to think of God as completely transcendent, far removed from us in heaven, and this can cause us to not take sin seriously. But this verse reminds us that God is also immanent, dwelling right inside us.

When we lie and steal and speak unwholesome words to people, we “grieve” the Holy Spirit. This reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force or energy – He is a person who feels, who has emotions like we do – and we can cause Him pain and sorrow – we can hurt Him. Sin disrupts our relationship with the Holy Spirit – He still dwells within us, but our fellowship and intimacy and harmony with Him is disrupted. It's similar to a married couple who have stopped speaking to one another – they're still married, but there is no warmth or closeness – there is no fellowship. The same is true when we grieve the Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 5:19 says, “Do not quench the Spirit.” When we lie and steal and harbor anger in our hearts, when we tear others down with our words, the work of the Holy Spirit is quenched and He is not free to work in our midst. It's important that we walk daily in the Spirit and yield control to Him. When we do sin, our fellowship with the Spirit is restored by confessing our sin and by resuming a walk of obedience.

In verses 31-32 Paul moves on to the fifth command of what we are to put off and put on... “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” As with each command, Paul starts with the negative – what we are to put off – then he gives the positive – what we are to do instead – and then he gives the reason we are to do it.

These verses are among the most important verses in the Bible on relationships and how we treat others, and the contrast between what we are to put off and put on could not be more stark. As believers we are to get rid of six Grinch-like sins: bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice. These words describe the sinful progression that begins in the heart with ugly thoughts and feelings towards someone, and which eventually erupts in outward, destructive behavior.

It begins with **bitterness**. The dictionary defines bitterness as anger and resentment at the way you are treated. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago in verse 26 where Paul addressed the sin of anger. Someone offends you or disrespects you and an emotion of anger rises up within you... You're treated unfairly or overlooked like the older brother of the prodigal son who seethed with anger when his younger brother got all the attention... Feelings of jealousy or envy rise up when you see someone who is getting more attention or has more success than you – like King Saul who heard the women of Israel singing the praise of David and was taken over by an evil spirit.

Bitter people hang on to past offenses and won't let them go. 1 Corinthians 13 says, "Love keeps no record of wrongs," but a bitter person remembers every wrong, every slight, as if it were recorded in a book... They said this about me, they didn't include me, they walked by me without saying hi, they disrespected my opinion. All these slights go into their mental file drawer in the form of a grudge. I have an extended family member who can easily bring up things that happened 20 or 30 years ago and remember every detail. A verse I have often quoted is Proverbs 19:11... "It is to one's glory to overlook an offense." As believers we should be quick to let minor things go and not be easily offended.

Very closely related to bitterness is **malice**. Malice is the desire to cause someone harm or suffering. When bitterness takes root in your heart and is allowed to fester, thoughts about getting even with your offender grows. They hurt you, and you want to hurt them. The classic example of malice is Cain – when his offering to the Lord is rejected and Abel's is accepted, he become angry and bitter. The Lord said, "Watch out, Cain, sin is crouching at your door, and it desires to rule over you." If you don't let go of this bitterness, it will control you and consume you.

The Christian life is more than coming to church, praying, and reading your Bible. As you do these things you must be aware of what is going on inside of you. I've known Christians who do all the outward things Christians should do, but inwardly they are full of anger and bitterness, and there is no genuine growth. It's only when we allow the Holy Spirit to dig deep into our inner thoughts and motives that we see genuine spiritual growth. The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship class we offer is a tremendous course to help you live authentically and uncover some of the core, inner sins that prevent you from moving forward in Christ. If we're not aware of the things that are going on inside of us it will eventually make it's way out in destructive ways, two of which are listed next: rage and anger.

**Rage** is violent and uncontrolled anger. This is road rage, when a person's emotions get the best of them and they react in a destructive way. When Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees were filled with rage and began an evil plot to kill Jesus. In Acts 7 when Stephen preached the that salvation is found in Christ, the Jewish Sanhedrin was enraged and gnashed their teeth. They yelled at the top of their lungs and dragged him out of the city and stoned him.

Closely related to rage is **anger**, which is more internalized than rage. As we talked about a few weeks ago, some people express anger quickly and explosively, and others bottle-up their anger and let it leak out passively by giving someone a cold shoulder, or talking behind their back, or launching a verbal jab. If anger is not dealt with it eventually rises to the surface and causes harm.

The next two on the list are brawling and slander – both of which are outward, destructive expressions of bitterness and malice. **Brawling** is throwing off all emotional restraint and erupting in yelling and shouting and screaming. All that does is make things worse. Proverbs 15:1 says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Christians should not be yellers.

**Slander** is making false or damaging statements about someone. When someone hurts you, the natural response is to want to hurt them back – not with fists, but with words. Slander is a common way of getting revenge. It can be telling an outright lie about someone, or it can be dropping little seeds of suspicion about someone. Both are meant to damage the other person's character and reputation. Slander is highly toxic because the person talked about is not present to correct any misinformation or defend a false accusation.

Paul paints a very ugly picture of an ugly, Grinch-like heart that has allowed resentment and bitterness to take root, and he says, "Get rid of it. Bitterness and malice and rage and brawling and slander have no place in the life of a believer. It not only harms you, but it harms your relationships, and it grieves the Holy Spirit who lives in you.

In verse 32 Paul turns to the positive command and says, “Do this instead.” He writes, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Imagine what the world would be like if everyone lived out this verse. Paul lists three virtues every believer ought to put on, and the first is **kindness**... “*be kind.*”

Kindness is a sweet disposition that treats others with graciousness and gentleness. Kindness is one of the first virtues we teach our children – be nice, be kind to your brother – treat people well. Someone defined kindness as “love with its work clothes on.” Kindness is love in action. Kindness is one of the qualities of love in 1 Corinthians 13, and it is one of the nine fruits of the Spirit that mark us as true believers.

Every person, saved or unsaved, can show kindness, but kindness for a believer is a supernatural transformation that comes from experiencing the God’s kindness in salvation. God is gracious and kind, and when we are supernaturally saved by His grace and are filled with His Holy Spirit, we are to be kind to others in return.

The opposite of kindness is harshness and rudeness. Some people say, “That’s just who I am – I’m blunt and to the point – I don’t sugar-coat things.” Kindness does not mean avoiding hard truths or conflict, but it’s treating people with dignity and respect – it’s doing unto them what you would want them to do unto you. Last week we talked about how our speech needs to be seasoned with salt – our words need to taste good and be pleasant. Galatians 6:1 says that if you need to approach someone about a sin they’ve committed, do it gently – show kindness and seek their restoration.

A little kindness goes a long way. James Dobson used to say that 75% of marriage problems would disappear if husbands and wives would simply start showing kindness and courtesy to one another. Kindness gets the focus off yourself and thinks and considers the needs and interests of others.

Kindness also communicates the love of God to a lost world. I have a book called *Conspiracy of Kindness*, written by a pastor in Cincinnati who talks about reaching the lost through simple, unassuming acts of kindness. For example, their church occasionally does free car washes. People drive up and say, “How much?” and they say “Free.” Why? “We just want to show Jesus’ love.” The author talks about how he carries a bucket and scrub brush whenever he goes on a trip. He goes to gas stations and offers to clean their toilets for them for free. Why? “Just to show you the love of Jesus.” Kindness helps prepare people’s hearts to hear what you have to say about Christ.

There are thousands of ways to demonstrate daily kindness – smiling a big one. Do you notice how little people tend to smile? As Christians we should smile – it communicates warmth and friendliness. Saying words like “please” and “thank you” and “I appreciate you” means more to people than you can imagine. A little kindness goes a long way.

The second positive virtue that should be part of every Christian’s life is **compassion**... “*Be kind and compassionate.*” The KJV says, “Be tenderhearted.” Compassion is the ability to feel sympathy for people – to enter into their pain and suffering and feel what they feel. Our old self judges people without pity and says, “They made their bed, now let them lie in it.” This is the attitude that most of the world has, but Christ was revolutionary in teaching compassion. Matthew 9:36 says, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). Jesus had a deep compassion for people, and calls for His followers to do the same.

One of the best ways to cultivate compassion is to enter into an understanding of what people are going through. As the Indian proverb says, “Never judge another man until you have walked a mile in his shoes.” It’s easy to stand off in the distance and pass judgment on a situation, and evaluate people through our own experiences. “I got a job, why can’t they? I raised good kids, what’s wrong with their kids? I never get depressed, why don’t they just get happy?”

Before you judge someone, ask: What would it be like to be them? What would it be like to be handicapped – to not be able to walk or stand or not be able to drive or take care of yourself? What would it feel like to be unemployed, with bills you cannot pay? What would it like to be widowed, to lose a child, to go through chemotherapy? I remember before becoming a parent I was often critical about the way parents raised their kids, and once I had kids of my own and experienced all that’s involved, I am much more compassionate. Once we walk in someone’s shoes, we find it easier to be tenderhearted and compassionate.

The third virtue that should characterize our lives as believers is **forgiveness**... “*forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*” Whereas our old self fostered bitterness and resentment when wronged or slighted, our new life is to reflect forgiveness. Dick and Christie gave an excellent message on forgiveness a few months back, and I encourage you to go back and listen to it on our church website, but it’s important to clearly understand what forgiveness is and what it isn’t. Let’s start with a few things that forgiveness is not.

First, **forgiveness is not forgetting**. The old saying goes, “Forgive and forget.” But there are sins committed against us that we will never forget. We can’t – they are forever recorded on the hard drive of our mind. The Bible says that God forgets our sins and remembers them no more. He could remember if He choice to, but He chooses not to. He chooses to never mention them, recount them, or hold them against us. That’s what forgetting means.

Second, **forgiveness does not mean you cease longing for justice**. One of the biggest barriers to forgiveness is our sense of justice. God is a God of justice, and being made in His image means that we seek justice and fairness. Some think that forgiveness means that your offender will not be held accountable for his or her actions. One of the important principles of forgiveness is that you let God deal with your offender... “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.” Forgiveness does not mean you ignore that a wrong was done – it simply means that you decide to let God be the avenger. Sometimes His justice is administered here on earth, and sometimes we will not see justice until after this life.

Third, **forgiveness does not mean trust with your offender is automatically restored**. If I loan my car to a friend who drives it recklessly and causes an accident, I can forgive him for wrecking it, but I’d be a fool to loan it to him again. After an offence, boundaries must be established until trust is regained. Trust is an important goal you should work towards, but trust must be earned and trust takes time.

Fourth, **forgiveness is rarely a one-time event**. Forgiveness is a process. The deeper the wound, the longer it takes to heal. No one can tell you how long the process will take – it may take weeks, it may take months, it may take years. Forgiveness often requires repetition – as Jesus said, “Seventy times seventy.” Forgiveness does not mean that you stop feeling pain, but as you work through the process of forgiveness the pain will lessen over time, and the memories of what happened to you will be less intense.

What then is forgiveness? The Greek word for forgive means “to release or dismiss.” In the Bible forgiveness carries with it the idea of releasing a debt that is owed.

Forgiveness is best illustrated in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18. The servant owed his king ten thousand bags of gold – an enormous sum – but he begged the king for more time, the king took pity on him, cancelled his debt, and let him go. The forgiven servant then went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a hundred silver coins – far less than what he owed his king. He grabbed his fellow servant and began to choke him and said, “Pay back what you owe me.” The fellow servant begged for mercy, but the forgiven servant refused and had his fellow servant thrown in jail. When the king found out what his servant had done, he threw him in jail and demanded full payment of the debt he owed. The parable ends by saying, “This is how your heavenly Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

The key to forgiving others is understanding how God has forgiven you. Verse 32 says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, *just as in Christ God forgave you.*” If God forgave my enormous debt of sin – which was enough to send me to hell – then I have an obligation to in turn forgive those who have sinned against me. This puts things into perspective. Yes, that person did something very egregious and harmful to me – but I have done the same – many times over – to God. Yet, even though I don’t deserve it, He forgives me. Even though the person who hurt me may not deserve my forgiveness, as a child of God who’s been forgiven, I can and must forgive.

The main idea of the verse we’ve looked at today is that God wants to transform us from the inside out – as sinners who have been saved by His grace and filled with the Holy Spirit, we can no longer be the people we were. We’re going to close our service in a minute with a song about asking God to search our heart. Transformation begins inside – in the way we think and feel – and change is best seen in how we relate to others.

As God looks at your heart right now, what does He see – is there a root of bitterness or malice that has taken hold of you – maybe it’s been there a long time. Maybe it’s given way to rage or brawling or slander. Maybe it’s still simmering inside waiting to erupt. God’s word to you today is: Get rid of it – don’t grieve the Holy Spirit inside you – acknowledge your sin to God and confess it.

Once you do, put on kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. Treat others the way God has treated you. If all of us lived out these commands, what a difference it would make in your marriage, in your family, in church, in every relationship. Like the Grinch, God can grow your heart three sizes, and replace those ugly thoughts and attitudes with love, and make you a blessing to others.