

PROVERBS: ETERNAL WISDOM FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

Growing in the Fear of the Lord and Godly Character for Life in a Fallen World

The Wisdom of Forgiveness

Key Idea:

Unforgiveness poisons relationships, hardens our own hearts, and disrupts our fellowship with God, but the wise person forgives as God has forgiven them, fostering healing to everyone involved.

Key Text:

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

[Proverbs 10:12 ESV](#)

Key Points:

- **The Foolishness of Cancel Culture** — Our culture has grown quick to expose and condemn what it considers sin, but it offers no path to forgiveness or reconciliation. Douglas Murray, echoed by Tim Keller, observed that we live in a culture that demands payment for sin while offering no means of atonement. This is the opposite of the way of wisdom. Wisdom takes sin seriously and still holds out a way back to restored relationship.
- **Love Covers Offenses** — Proverbs sets two paths side by side: “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses” ([Prov 10:12](#)). To “cover” an offense is to forgive it — to refuse to count it against the person so that the relationship can be restored. This is the language Scripture uses for God’s own forgiveness ([Ps 32:1–2](#); [Ps 85:2](#)), and it is the example and standard for us: as God forgives our sin to restore relationship with Him, the wise person forgives the sins of others to restore relationship with them. Peter alludes to this proverb when he says love covers a multitude of sins ([1 Pet 4:8](#)), and Paul says love “bears” all things ([1 Cor 13:7](#)) — a word that literally means “covers.” Clement of Rome later wove these texts together in his description of love. The path of hatred is the path of the fool, who holds on to offense, magnifies sin, and deepens relational breakdown. The path of love is the path of wisdom, which overlooks and forgives sin so that the relationship can be restored.
- **Unforgiveness Ruins Relationships and Disrupts Community** — Hatred will not forgive; it stirs up and multiplies strife ([Prov 10:12](#)). A very similar proverb makes the point from another angle: “Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends” ([Prov 17:9](#)). Love covers the offense, while hatred spreads it to others, leading to further breakdown. Foolish hatred magnifies sin to the detriment of the relationship; wise love forgives so that the relationship can flourish.
- **Unforgiveness Hardens My Own Heart** — Paul sets two heart conditions in contrast: one bitter, angry, and hateful; the other kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving ([Eph 4:31–32](#)). When I

refuse to forgive, I set my heart on a path toward bitterness, anger, and hardness. When I practice forgiveness, my own heart is softened. Anne Lamott captured the irony of unforgiveness by comparing it to swallowing poison and waiting for someone else to die. Unforgiveness does not only hurt my relationship with others — it poisons my own heart, and so it is ultimately self-destructive.

- **Unforgiveness Disrupts My Relationship with God** — Jesus ties receiving forgiveness from God to forgiving others: “forgive, and you will be forgiven” ([Luke 6:37](#)). The same link appears in the Lord’s Prayer ([Matt 6:12](#)) and in the parable of the wicked, unforgiving servant ([Matt 18:23–35](#)). A heart that is harsh, judgmental, condemning, and unforgiving will eventually become hard and unable to receive forgiveness itself. This is not salvation by works; it is the law of sowing and reaping. Unforgiveness unleashes death in the community around me and within my own heart and life.
- **Wisdom Is Slow to Take Offense and Gentle in Addressing Real Sin** — We should admit up front that forgiveness is hard. C. S. Lewis observed that everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive, and Scripture commands it so often because we find it so difficult. The first step is to be slow to take offense: “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense” ([Prov 19:11](#)); “The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult” ([Prov 12:16](#)). Wisdom recognizes that everyone has bad days, and it distinguishes between sins that need forgiveness and differences of opinion that are best dropped ([Prov 17:14](#)). Many today look for reasons to be offended, but that is the path of the fool. Often, we simply need to let it go. But when overlooking has not worked and a truly hurtful sin is festering, it is more loving to address it: “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend” ([Prov 27:5–6](#)). This must be done gently, not harshly or arrogantly, and always with awareness of my own sin and weakness ([Gal 6:1](#)).
- **Remember the Forgiveness You Have in Christ** — We are commanded to forgive as the Lord has forgiven us ([Col 3:12–13](#)). When I reflect on the tender forgiveness I have received in Christ, it prompts me to forgive others. If I find it hard to forgive someone, I need to turn my focus back to the Gospel. The forgiveness I received includes all my sins, the full depth of my guilt, the sins I commit repeatedly, and the restoration God gives me. C.S. Lewis put it sharply: to be a Christian means to forgive what seems inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in us.
- **Forgive, Pray, and Leave It in God’s Hands** — True forgiveness looks for restored relationship whenever possible, though sometimes it is not possible ([Rom 12:18–21](#)). Even if the other person disagrees, will not confess, or remains unrepentant, I do not let it harden me, and I do not long for vengeance. I leave the matter in the hands of God, who knows how to handle it. Where possible, I even seek to bless the person for the sake of restoration. In every case, I refuse to let bitterness fester in my heart, because that only damages me and never leads to a godly resolution.

Discussion Questions:

- Bret opened by describing the rise of cancel culture, which is eager to expose and judge sin but offers no path to forgiveness or reconciliation. Where have you seen this pattern in the culture around you? Why do you think a culture that demands payment for sin, but offers no means of

atonement, is so unstable and so cruel? How does the Christian vision of sin and forgiveness stand in contrast?

- [Proverbs 10:12](#) says that love “covers all offenses,” and Scripture uses the same language for God’s forgiveness ([Ps 32:1–2](#); [Ps 85:2](#)). What does it mean to “cover” an offense? How is covering an offense different from ignoring it, excusing it, or pretending it never happened? How does God’s forgiveness of you shape the way you understand what you are called to do?
- [Proverbs 17:9](#) says that “he who repeats a matter separates close friends.” When someone wrongs us, the temptation is often to tell others, whether through venting, gossip, or “processing.” Where do you feel that temptation most? What is the difference between seeking wise counsel about an offense and repeating a matter in a way that spreads it?
- Paul contrasts a heart of bitterness, wrath, and malice with a heart that is kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving ([Eph 4:31–32](#)). Bret said that unforgiveness hardens my own heart and that practicing forgiveness softens it. Have you experienced this in your own life, either a season when held-on offense made you harder, or a time when choosing to forgive softened you? What did you notice?
- Anne Lamott compared unforgiveness to drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. Who is actually harmed when we hold on to unforgiveness? Why do we so often cling to resentment even when we know it is hurting us? What do we believe we are getting from it?
- Jesus links our receiving of forgiveness with our forgiving of others ([Luke 6:37](#); [Matt 6:12](#); [Matt 18:23–35](#)). Bret was careful to say this is not salvation by works but the law of sowing and reaping: a hard, unforgiving heart gradually becomes unable to receive forgiveness itself. How do you understand that distinction? What does the parable of the unforgiving servant reveal about the heart of someone who has been forgiven much yet will not forgive?
- [Proverbs 19:11](#), [12:16](#), and [17:14](#) all commend being slow to take offense and willing to overlook an insult. Bret noted that many people today look for reasons to be offended. How do you tell the difference between a sin that truly needs to be forgiven and addressed and a difference of opinion or a bad moment that should simply be let go? Is there an area where you tend to take offense too quickly?
- Sometimes overlooking is not enough. Bret said that if you have tried to move past something and cannot, it likely needs to be addressed, gently ([Prov 27:5–6](#); [Gal 6:1](#)). What makes it hard for you to address a real hurt directly? Do you tend to avoid it and let it fester, or to confront it too harshly? What would it look like to speak gently while staying aware of your own sin and weakness?
- [Colossians 3:12–13](#) calls us to forgive as the Lord forgave us. Bret encouraged us that when forgiveness is hard, we should return to the Gospel and remember the depth of forgiveness we have received: all our sins, our repeated sins, and the restoration God gives us. Think of someone you find hard to forgive. How might meditating on what Christ has forgiven in you change the way you approach that person?
- Bret said that true forgiveness seeks restoration when possible, but that sometimes the other person will not agree, will not confess, or is unrepentant. In those cases, we forgive, pray, and

leave the matter in God's hands, refusing both bitterness and vengeance ([Rom 12:18–21](#)). What does it look like to forgive someone who has not asked for forgiveness? How do you hold together forgiving from the heart and recognizing that full reconciliation may not be possible?

- Bret observed that our culture encourages unforgiveness, preferring “no contact” to working through relational difficulty, and that technology makes it easier than ever to drop a relationship and quietly harbor resentment. Where have you seen this temptation in your own life? Is the Spirit bringing anyone to mind whom you have not forgiven, perhaps a family member, friend, or coworker, or even someone who has moved away or died? What is one step you could take this week?
- The Table of Forgiveness: The benediction text is [Psalm 32:1–2](#): “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity.” At the Table we remember and freshly receive God's forgiveness, which frees us to forgive others. How does coming to the Table week after week train us to be people who extend the forgiveness we have received? What do you need to receive from the Lord, and what do you need to release to Him?

For Further Study:

- Read [Proverbs 10:12](#) and [Proverbs 17:9](#) alongside [Psalm 32:1–2](#) and [Psalm 85:2](#). Trace the language of “covering” sin. What does it tell you about the way God deals with the sins of His people? How does the Psalms' use of the image shape what it means for us to cover offenses with love?
- Study [1 Peter 4:8](#) and [1 Corinthians 13:7](#) as New Testament echoes of Proverbs 10:12. How does it deepen your understanding of Christian love to see that it “covers” and “bears” the faults of others? What would it look like for your church community to be marked by this kind of love?
- Read [Matthew 18:21–35](#) slowly, including Peter's question about how often to forgive. What is the size of the first servant's debt compared with the debt owed to him? What does the contrast reveal about why unforgiveness is so foolish for those who have been forgiven by God?
- Study [Ephesians 4:31–32](#) and [Colossians 3:12–13](#) together. Both passages ground forgiveness in the way God in Christ has forgiven us. List the heart conditions Paul tells us to put away and the ones he tells us to put on. Which do you most need to ask the Spirit to cultivate in you right now?
- Meditate on [Psalm 32:1–2](#) — the benediction from Sunday. You are blessed because the Lord has forgiven your transgression and covered your sin by the blood of Christ. In Him, the Lord counts no iniquity against you. How does resting in that blessing free you to go and forgive, and to be a blessing, to others?
- This week, ask the Holy Spirit whether there is anyone you have not forgiven. Write down the name and ask the Lord for grace to forgive. Pray for that person and leave the matter in God's hands. If it is wise and helpful, consider taking a step toward restoring the relationship, gently and humbly.

- Watch [After Hours](#) (available Tuesday) for additional teaching on what to do when full reconciliation is not possible.
- For another deep dive into the topic of forgiveness and how it is needed to maintain and restore healthy relationships, see the teaching [Slipping Over the Line](#) (When Trust Is Broken).
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for deeper study of [forgiveness](#), [wisdom and knowledge](#), and [fellowship](#).