

## THE HARDEST NUT TO CRACK Colossians 3:13-15

### INTRODUCTION

When Laurie and I were on vacation back in October we did something we hadn't done for 33 years. On our honeymoon we ate at between 15 and 20 different restaurants. Of those only 4 are still in business. Two of those are a Pizza Hut and a McDonald's. Yes, we went to McDonald's on our honeymoon because we were running out of money. We have not been back to either the McDonald's or the Pizza Hut. The last night of our honeymoon we ate at a Japanese restaurant called Tanaka's, which we patronized again a number of years ago. The lone remaining establishment from our honeymoon is a place called Longhi's in the town of Lahaina. We have walked by it on numerous occasions since our honeymoon but have not eaten there since our honeymoon. It's not that the food was bad. In fact, I have no recollection of what we ate the first time we went there. In October we again had a meal, a mere 33 years after our first visit. We wanted to go back because our previous visit to the restaurant was so memorable. Wait, I thought you said you don't remember what you ate there. How can you call it memorable if you don't even recall what you ate?

It wasn't memorable because of the food. It was memorable because it was the site of our first argument as a husband and wife. When we went there in October it looked much the same as we remember it. Same set up, same tables and chairs, same floor. We even identified the table we were at when we had that argument. We took a picture of it. Our waiter asked us if we had ever been to the restaurant before. We said, "Yes, we were here on our honeymoon 33 years ago and had our first argument as a married couple sitting at that table right there." I expected that he would enter into the spirit of the thing and make something fun out of it. He didn't seem even a little interested. He merely said, "May I tell you what our specials are for this evening?" I was disappointed.

I bring our visit and our memories of Longhi's up because they remind us that relationships involve conflict. Personality tests we took a couple of years ago showed that though Laurie is more outgoing than I am, in most ways we are very much alike. We are both very easy going and even tempered. Not much riles either one of us. On top of all that we love each other deeply. Yet as similar as we are, as laid back as we are, as much as we love each other, we didn't even get through our honeymoon before we had a conflict that we have never forgotten.

I've been talking over the past month about simplifying your life. The most complicating thing in your life is people. You are going to have conflicts and complications when you relate to people. The only way to avoid that is to have no people in your life. But that's impossible. You have to deal with people.

Do you like Macadamia nuts? I love them. Though we usually associate them with Hawaii because that's where so many are grown, they are not native to Hawaii. They actually are from Australia and were first brought to Hawaii in 1881. But the thing that is pertinent this morning about macadamias is that they have the hardest shell of all the nuts in the world. It requires pressure of 300 pounds per square inch to crack them. When it

comes to simplifying your life I guarantee you that the hardest nut to crack is relationships. Why bother? Because, like macadamia nuts, they're more than worth the effort.

You and I were created for relationships. To be alone in the world is more painful than whatever hurt comes from the little battles we fight with each other. We're in that "can't live with them, can't live without them" situation. But is there a way to simplify our lives when it comes to people? Is there something we can do that will help us with our relationships? God gives us great direction in Colossians 3:13-15. Three key concepts for relationships show up in these verses.

## **FORGIVE**

This letter from Paul was written to a group of people he had never met. At one point Paul had spent three years in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor. During that time a man named Epaphras believed Paul's message and put his faith in Jesus Christ. He went to his home town of Colossae about 120 miles away and told people there about Jesus. Many believed and a new church started. Later false teachers came along and started muddying the waters. Paul wrote this letter to clear things up. He also included some general instructions for how to live as followers of Jesus. In this section he is telling them how to relate to each other.

Obviously to bear with one another means to put up with. We will always have differences with each other. That is inevitable in this fallen world populated by fallen people. There is simply no way around the fact that though you might initially think a person or a group of people are the best in the world, eventually you are going to see their dark side, because everybody has one.

Laurie and I helped plant a church several months before we got married. We started with a group of about 20 people that became the core of our church. The heart of the group was 6 "older" couples. I realize now they were younger than I am today, but to us they seemed so very old. Laurie and I were both young and inexperienced and we felt blessed to be connected to these older believers.

We thought these people were the epitome of what followers of Jesus should be. They were so wise and mature and good. What a delightful bunch they were. We would not have to "bear" with them because they were such a blessing. Eventually reality set in. One of those couples were the genuine article. In all the years I have known them I saw nothing from them but Christlikeness. They were amazing.

The other couples were good people who loved Jesus, but they were not perfect. It wasn't long before those imperfections became apparent. One man, whom everyone considered one of the nicest people you'd ever meet, was actually full of anger. His anger peeked out at times, but it spilled out on those closest to him causing serious problems in his family. At one point he asked to meet for lunch. I thought he just wanted to spend time together. He didn't. He had a message to deliver. He didn't think I preached enough about judgment. He wanted to hear about the wrath of God. He wanted people to feel the lash

of God's anger on them. I told him I tried to preach what the Bible said. If it talked about judgment then I would. That wasn't good enough. He hinted that if there wasn't a change that he and his family might have to move on. Soon they did.

Another man proved to be rigid and almost legalistic in his thinking, and that had tragic effects in his family. So it went. They were flawed people, just like me. Only one of those couples lasted 10 years in ministry with us. They all found flaws in me that caused them to look elsewhere. All except that one couple, who showed us amazing grace.

Years ago one pastor got some notoriety for writing an article entitled "Beware The Man Who Meets You At The Train." The point of it was that the people who are your most fervent supporters as a new leader are usually the ones who will turn on you most viciously and quickly. They will learn that you are not perfect and they will become disenchanted with you. If you were perfect they wouldn't like it either because it would make them feel guilty and inferior.

Why do couples who seem so much in love, who are so excited at the wedding and so full of joy, soon find themselves angry at each other, barely tolerating each other, and in many cases getting divorced? It is because we are all flawed, and if we are going to have any chance of sticking together it will require that we bear with all of the flaws and failures of those around us.

The key concept in verse 13 is forgiving. To bear with others is forgiving the flaws, the eccentricities, the quirks that can be annoying and cause them to fail to meet our hopes and expectations. Laurie has to bear with a husband who snores and wakes her up at night. But there will also be times when what we must forgive is not just a personal oddity but a wrong. There will be times when others hurt us or offend us with words, actions, expressions or attitudes.

In his book, *Leadership From The Inside Out*, Kevin Harney tells a story that brings the issue of forgiveness into sharp focus. He and his wife struggled mightily with finances while he was in seminary. It was a terrible ordeal month after month, year after year. He recalled several occasions when he went to his pastor to ask if he knew of any sources of financial help for people like himself. The pastor always gave him a speech about how that pastor had it hard when he was in seminary but he made it through. He told Kevin their denomination had no funds available and that Kevin just needed to suck it up and learn to eat cold beans out of a can like he had if necessary. After he graduated he became a pastor and learned that their denomination had a special fund specifically designated to help seminary students and gave them financial aid. His pastor had been a key member of that committee and could easily have helped him. Instead he left him to struggle. Kevin knew that he had to forgive the man and not harbor any resentment or bitterness toward him. That's hard to do.

Theologians call the condition of the human race "total depravity." That does not mean we are all as evil as we could be, but that every part of our being has been corrupted. Our penchant for serving self touches every act and every motive. That means every person

you encounter has potential for doing terrible things. Yes, all humans do good things, but in your lifetime people will lie to you, they will gossip about you, they'll believe gossip about you, they'll say hurtful things, they'll misunderstand you, they'll ignore you, they'll sacrifice you for some agenda. That will happen to all of us. And we are called in this verse to forgive them!

This is essential to relationships. Few things do more to foul up relationships and make our lives more stressful and difficult than bitterness and resentment. Forgiving is so important Jesus said in Matthew 6:14-15, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

When the disciples were flabbergasted by Jesus' insistence on forgiving Peter asked in Matthew 18:21 how many times he had to forgive someone. Was it as many as 7 times? I think Peter was putting out there the extreme. Hey, if Lucy kept pulling the ball away so Charlie Brown whiffs when trying to kick it and lands on his back, and she does this 7 times in a row, I'd think it remarkable if he kept forgiving her. But remember how Jesus answered in verse 22. "I tell you, not 7 times..." I read that and think, "Oh, good. That did seem extreme. So maybe it's only 2 or 3, which seems reasonable to me." But Jesus went on, "but 77 times." That's an interpretation. Some translators think it should be 70 times 7. Either way, the point is if someone does the same thing against you 77 times by that time it has become clear you are never going to stop forgiving. Really since 7 is often the number of perfection or completion in the Bible the point is to forgive infinitely.

Paul's soaring description of love is found in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. In verse 5 Paul wrote that love "is not rude, it is not self seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." Did you hear that? Love doesn't keep track of how other people have wronged the one loving. It burns the memory of those wrongs and flushes them down the toilet. It doesn't record them in a mental journal to be trotted out and used as weapons.

A number of years ago in another ministry a couple came to see me because they were having troubles in their marriage. They presented the problem to me as though they were having some minor issues that they needed a little assistance working through. I figured I could help them with minor difficulties. Probably all they needed was a third party to resolve some little differences. Wrong. Within minutes it became apparent that these two people were at war. Before long they were fighting once again battles that had started 15 years earlier. They were citing hurts and failures and accusations that they had catalogued from the distant past. Neither of them was willing to let go of the past. Both insisted that they were loving the other person. Neither was willing to admit the obvious, that they were keeping a detailed record of wrongs, which meant that they weren't loving each other. The result was predictable. Their marriage did not survive.

Nothing will weigh us down, create more dissonance and stress in our lives, complicate our relationships more than bitterness. When we hold those past hurts and failures against people it creates poison in our own souls, to say nothing of what it does to the

relationship with a person that we are supposed to love. Forgiveness brings healing. It heals our own souls and it heals relationships because it allows love to flow.

When you fly in an airliner as you take off and ascend pressure builds up inside your head. At some point you yawn and your ears pop. What a relief that is. The pressure is released inside your head as it equalizes. Forgiveness is like having your ears pop. It is the relational equivalent of that physical act, for it releases the pressure that builds up in your soul when there is hurt and anger there.

Dr. David Levy is a neurosurgeon here in San Diego. He has written a book entitled *Gray Matter* in which he recounts a number of stories from his practice. One story was about a man named Sam who had a severe and potentially deadly AVM, an arteriovenous malformation on his spinal cord. That is a malformation of arteries and veins. To repair it surgically was extremely risky, but Sam had no other options. Dr. Levy warned Sam of the terrible risks, but they had to proceed with the surgery. At first it seemed it was successful, but then Sam began deteriorating to the point where he was paralyzed with only a little movement in his left arm and leg. Within weeks he was a different person, emaciated and sullen. He was angry at Dr. Levy for what the surgery had done to him. Dr. Levy did all that was possible, but Sam's situation was beyond his control. Sam was still angry. His case bothered Levy more than any other in his career.

Three years later he went to visit Sam. He was still sullen and was not doing well. Even though Levy had done all that was humanly possible he still felt bad about what had happened. So he apologized to Sam. He said he had never wanted this for him and that he had let him down. Then he asked Sam to forgive him. He said, "This is not about my trying to feel good; it is about your becoming free. If you have resentment, anger or bitterness toward me, it is not good for you or for your health. I want you to be free from it so you can heal." Sam began crying. Levy asked Sam if he would like him to walk through forgiveness with him. He said yes. So the surgeon led him through. "I choose to forgive Dr. Levy for the things he did that hurt me." He took him through the whole thing. This led to him finding forgiveness from God through Jesus Christ for all the resentment and bitterness that he had in his own heart. When done Dr. Levy asked him how he felt. "Much better" he said with the biggest smile Levy had ever seen on him. He looked like a completely different person. Within six months Sam called the surgeon and his voice was exuberant. He was able to support himself with his arms and walk between parallel bars. He was set free, and that freedom came from forgiveness.

The healthiest thing you can do for your own soul is to forgive those who have hurt you. If you want to have simple relationships this is critical. Bitterness poisons relationships and your own heart. But let's be clear about what forgiveness is:

Forgiveness is not *a feeling*. Hurtful things will likely still hurt. But forgiveness is a choice, an act of your will. It is choosing to extend grace, to not seek harm or vengeance for the other person, but to actually seek that person's good.

Forgiveness is not **deserved**. You don't forgive a person because that individual deserves it. Paul wrote in verse 13, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Did you deserve forgiveness from God? No, he gave it to us out of his grace and mercy. That's how we give it as well. When we choose not to forgive another it is ultimately because we don't really believe that we need forgiveness from God.

Forgiveness is not **excusing or explaining**. It does not say that what the other person did was all right. It may not be all right. But it is choosing not to let that wrong stand between you and the other. Forgiveness is not **reconciliation**. Reconciliation requires that there be some repentance on the part of the other person. If a person has wronged me though I may choose to forgive him there will be no reconciliation until that person acknowledges the wrong.

Forgiveness is **a choice**. I may feel hurt, even still angry at a person, but I can choose to forgive anyway. Forgiveness is also **a process**. That means you might have to choose it continually. Most of the time it is not a one time thing, but an on going choice we must make over and over.

Forgiveness is **active**. Romans 12:14 says, "Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse." To bless means to seek their good. So forgiveness is more than simply choosing not to get revenge. It is to return good for evil. Puritan Thomas Watson in his book, *Body of Divinity*, wrote that forgiveness is "when we strive against all thoughts of revenge...wish well to them, grieve at their calamities, pray for them, seek reconciliation with them and show ourselves ready on all occasions to relieve them."

Imagine you have a boat on which you are going to sail across the sea to some lovely islands. Perhaps you are in Florida and you are going to sail down to the islands in the Caribbean. You get the boat all ready. There's a perfect breeze blowing. You hoist the sails. They fill with wind...and you go nowhere. You don't move because you forgot to untie the line that holds your boat to the dock. As long as that line is there you're not going anywhere. That's what failure to forgive is like. As long as we have that in our lives we're stuck right where we are and we are not going anywhere.

## LOVE

In the previous verses in Colossians 3 Paul had mentioned a number of virtues like compassion, kindness, humility and gentleness. But in verse 14 he says, "Over all these virtues put on love." This is a critical step in simplifying our relationships. 1 Corinthians 13:2 says, "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." That's pretty amazing. I can prophecy, understand any mystery and have unshakeable faith that can accomplish miracles, but if I don't love others none of that matters. It's all about love!

Everyone is in favor of love. Everyone likes to think of themselves as being loving. But if everyone is loving why is there so little love in this world? We like the idea of love but

are not so enamored of what love actually means. To make matters worse we seem to have big blind spots so we don't notice our own failures when it comes to loving others.

Remember 1 Corinthians 13:5. It says that love is "not self-seeking." In other words, when I'm thinking about what another person should do for me, I am not loving that individual. Love is purely about giving good to others. Paul Tripp defines love this way: love is "willing self-sacrifice for the good of another that doesn't demand reciprocation or that the person being loved is deserving."

This seriously simplifies our relationships. At every moment we only need to ask, "what am I trying to do in this relationship?" No matter what the other person is doing my role is clear. This verse commands me to love. There are no conditions on the verse. I am not to operate out of the kingdom of self, but out of the kingdom of God. I am called to love.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that I have been having trouble with our mobile phone provider. They overcharged us \$220 due to an idiotic mistake they made. I called them 3 times to try to resolve the problem and every time got the same response. Yes, that should not have happened. We will fix the problem and get back to you within a couple of days. I never heard from them again. This is where things stood a few weeks ago when I mentioned it in a sermon. Well I recently got another bill. And the charge was still there. So I called a fourth time. I was loaded for bear. I was so irritated I wanted to just blast the customer service rep I reached. I had my script all ready and had worked up a real emotional lather. But then it was as though the Lord tapped me on the shoulder, cleared his throat and said, "Ahem. What exactly is your goal in your relationship with this person?" I answered, "This isn't a person. This is a customer disservice rep. This is a foul agent of deception and corruption. I'm doing battle here with the forces of evil." The response was, "Does what someone else has done excuse you from doing what I've called you to do?" I said, "Maybe. Kind of." I was cornered. I was about to speak to a human being and according to this verse my goal with every person in every situation should be love. That meant that while I needed to be firm in my dealings with this person, it was more important that I be loving.

In May 2010 an airliner with Jetstar Airlines was flying from Darwin, Australia to Singapore. As they were on their approach for landing the first officer called for the pilot to abort the landing and go around. The pilot did not respond. The first officer repeated his call, still no response. As the plane passed 720 feet in altitude an alarm sounded. Even with the alarm the pilot didn't act. It was only when the plane was below 400 feet that the pilot paid attention. The pilot had failed to lower the landing gear. Fortunately at the last minute the pilot finally aborted the landing narrowly averting a deadly disaster. What was the problem? He was so focused on unlocking his cell phone and texting that he didn't notice even hear the warning of his first officer or the alarm. Here's one thing I am clear on. When I have to fly, I really want the pilot to focus on the task, which is to fly the stinking plane! That's your job, don't get distracted. In relationships there are a lot of distractions. What is your job? It is to love the other person. It doesn't matter what they might or might not do, it doesn't matter what else is going on around you, your job is to love that other person. Galatians 5:14 says, "the entire law is summed up in a single

command: love your neighbor as yourself.” If you love someone you are doing everything that God commands you to do in your relationship with that person.

There’s only one thing you need to think about, only one thing you must do in every relationship. Love as Christ loves. But that can be so very difficult. No, it’s more than that. It’s impossible. How can we love often unloving people that way?

## PEACE

Paul tells us in verse 15. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. This is crucial to enabling us to forgive and to love. Jesus said in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Some of our biggest difficulties in life is we let our hearts become troubled. We become afraid. We are afraid of what people might do to us. They might not like us. They might reject us. They might hurt us. So we focus on defending ourselves and attacking them when they hurt us. We fret about making sure they love us and like us, all because we are afraid.

Jesus’ peace means we are at peace with God. He loves us in his grace in Christ, so we can rest in that. His peace means that God is watching over us and will protect us and give us what we need. So letting his peace rule in our lives means trusting that what he gives us will be enough, regardless of what those people might do. His peace means we are loved, we are safe in him, we are valuable, we are approved, we have meaning and purpose, so we can trust in all of that. Christ is with us, so we are as safe as the disciples were when they were in that boat that they were sure was about to sink in a storm.

I’ve told the story many times. On my birthday in 1979 Laurie and I went out to dinner. We did something unusual for us. We went to a nice steak restaurant and had an expensive dinner. We didn’t do that much because we didn’t have much money. But that night we talked about our lives, about our future and about our relationship. We had affirmed a month earlier that we loved each other. But Laurie was in an uncertain place in her life. She wasn’t ready for a big commitment. She had so much to work through in her life, so many plans for her future. As we talked it became apparent to both of us that our relationship had no place to go. It was painful for us both, but we had to admit that we were at a dead end. We needed to face it, let go of each other and move on. Happy birthday to me. The next morning when I woke up I was sad. No, I was more than sad. I was broken-hearted. I knew that this young woman was the most unique person I had ever met. She was bright, beautiful, intelligent, full of joy and full of life. Having her leave my life hurt terribly. I wanted to mope, to feel sorry for myself. Unfortunately life wasn’t waiting for me to lick my wounds. I had school and work to go to. Honestly I didn’t have the energy to get up in time to spend time with God before getting my day started, and I didn’t really want to anyway. I was a little disappointed with what God was giving me in life. I got dressed, had some cereal and headed out to my car to drive to school. It wouldn’t start. It seemed like the battery was dead. But that wasn’t possible because my battery had died a week before and I’d just put in a brand new one. I tried



everything I knew to fix the problem, but it wouldn't start. By this time I was going to miss my first class and all of my friends had gone off to school or work. There was only one person I knew who could give me a ride. It was Laurie. I thought I couldn't call her, not after what we had decided the night before. But I had no other options. I called and apologized to her. I explained my situation and she agreed to swing by and pick me up on her way to school.

It would be almost an hour before Laurie could get there, so I had some time and nothing to do. It was like God was pounding me on the head to come talk to him. More than a little annoyed I said, "Fine. Have it your way," to the Lord. I started by just pouring out my heart to God. I told him how disappointed I was. I told him it didn't feel much like he cared for me. I told him this really hurt. I just aired it all out. Then I opened the Bible. I read in Psalm 91 about how "he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty" and about how he is our refuge. It was almost like God was speaking to me. He was saying, "I care about you. I want good for you. I have a future for you and for Laurie both. I know you are sad now, but trust in my love." As I read I could feel my heart lifting. I hated thinking of the future without Laurie, but it was like God was telling me that he had good in mind for me and for her, even if it did not include us being together. It was so comforting. It almost felt like God was right there talking to me and telling me not to be afraid, that he would never abandon me. By the time Laurie got there the peace of Christ was ruling in my heart. Sad, yes, no doubt. Disappointed and feeling the loss, for sure, but hope was there, and it was strong. It felt like the Lord was nudging me to encourage Laurie. She needed hope too. She was hurting and needed comfort too. So I started sharing with her what God had done in my heart that morning and telling her that God was going to do great things in her life, even if I wasn't going to be a part of it. The peace of Christ enabled me to love her, to care for her that day.

Life doesn't usually work out the way it did that day. I wish it did. Though I didn't know it, as I was seeking to lift Laurie's spirit, as I was affirming for her that God had a future for her and that it would be great, she was realizing that whatever future there might be for her, if I wasn't in it she just didn't see how she could ever be happy. Neither of us made it to our classes that day. It wasn't long before we were engaged to be married, and so happy about it we had to celebrate.

The key was the peace of Christ came to rule in my heart. Had that not happened I don't see how I would ever have experienced the greatest blessing outside of life in Christ that God has given me. That blessing is being married to Laurie. It started with letting the peace of Christ rule in my heart. Christ's peace is what enables us to think about loving and forgiving others. I am safe in Christ. It is that safety that brings the freedom to do what he has called us to do.

### CONCLUSION

Is there someone you need to forgive? Don't put it off. Forgive that person. Tell them. Sometimes it may create more problems than it will resolve to tell them because they don't think they need to be forgiven. In that case, tell the Lord you forgive them, tell yourself you forgive them, and tell someone you trust that you forgive this person.

Then make it your goal to love, regardless of what others deserve or whether they reciprocate. Love as Christ loves. And live in his peace, for that is the only way you will be able to love and forgive as he loves and forgives you.