

# Appreciating Forbearance

What comes to mind when you think of the word “forbearance?” Perhaps it is Scripture. Perhaps it reminds you of someone you know – someone that is forbearing. Often this attribute of forbearance is associated with some uncomfortable feelings, thoughts, and experiences. It is not something our human nature engages naturally. The belief is especially present in society today that relationships should exist only as long as they benefit you. If a relationship becomes a hindrance, inconvenient, or downright difficult, you should just move on. This equates relationships to something you buy at the store. If it works for you or helps you, you invest in it. If it does not, you let it go. Relationships in the Body of Christ, however, are called to a different standard. There is a beauty to relationships we do not choose but come about as a result of being saved into a community. They can be quite sanctifying for us, but they often require forbearance to make them work. Redeeming and appreciating forbearance as a beautiful attribute that Christ calls us to should be our goal.

## What is forbearance?

According to Webster’s 1828 dictionary, forbearance is “the exercise of patience; long suffering; indulgence towards those who injure us; lenity; delay of resentment or punishment.” Expansion of this definition means to be tolerant or understanding toward those who may annoy us – a challenge to any human spirit. Paul shares in *Colossians 3:12-13* “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

There are a couple things to consider from this passage. First, the Greek word Paul uses is a verb that is translated into the English language in the following ways: “suffer, bear with, forbear, endure.” The Strong’s definition is “to hold oneself up against” or figuratively to “put up with.” Forbearance is a love action. Consider the experience of holding a baby. Your arms and body are standing erect, holding yourself up to sustain and bear the weight of this precious child. The child is a liability and you are “bearing with” or “enduring” the weight put upon your body. In a similar way, as we forbear with each other, we are acknowledging the inevitable reality that we all have annoying habits or characteristics which call us into tolerance in an understanding way.

Secondly, forbearance and forgiveness are similar but not the same. Forgiveness requires an offence to be pardoned. Forgiveness occurs when sin has occurred. Put another way, forgiveness recognizes fault in the other and then dismisses the charge. Forbearance does not necessarily involve sin, though it can. Often forbearance involves accepting and receiving the rough edges and annoying habits that most of us seem to have. However, at times forbearance also calls us into patience and grace with those that may make hurtful comments or sin against us. There are times where relationally we are called to both forgiveness and forbearance when sin occurs. Remember, the “riches of his goodness and forbearance” led to our repentance (*Romans 2:4*). Also, consider *Romans 15:6-7* “That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.” We are called to “receive” or “take” one another as Christ took you and me. Did Christ receive each of us in a state of perfection? Certainly not, nor was that his expectation. Both forgiveness and forbearance are choices we make as individuals that lead to freedom. Forgiveness frees us from bitterness and wrath while forbearance frees us from unrealistic expectations of others.

## What does forbearance look like?

While the concepts of forbearance can make sense in our head, it is an entirely different matter to allow this attribute to grip our heart. The reality is forbearance is hard work. It requires the Holy Spirit leading our hearts. Consider an example: A brother or sister in your local church is awkward in social settings - laughs at inappropriate times during a conversation or misses social cues that seem evident. This continually leads to awkward and uncomfortable interactions. Likewise, consider that some individuals in your life are no doubt overly “scattered” or perhaps “too structured”. How do we forbear

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and “receive” these individuals as Christ has received us? As you reflect on this, remember others are most likely continually forbearing with us regarding some of our own annoying habits or behaviors.

In both examples, forbearance is not just gritting your teeth and bearing it. It is much more:

- Forbearance **is** enduring with someone or something that does not comply with your favor.
- Forbearance **is not** assuming someone has ill intent or is intentionally engaging in annoying behaviors.
- Forbearance **is** acknowledging an annoyance and tolerating it.
- Forbearance **is not** confronting an unfavorable issue and urging change.
- Forbearance **is** expecting the irritant to exist and not becoming bitter that it does.
- Forbearance **is not** enjoying, appreciating, or celebrating the annoyance.
- Forbearance **is** receiving people and loving them despite their unfavorable attributes.
- Forbearance **is not** ignoring or avoiding people or who do not strike your fancy.
- Forbearance **is** an attribute of Christ towards you.

In order to engage forbearance well, we need to have a good understanding of brokenness in our world and in ourselves. Christ calls us to view others through a lens that sees much more of an individual than their annoying behavior. We need to appreciate others as an image-bearer of God in spite of a rough edge. Additionally, forbearance flows out of “*lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering*” (*Ephesians 4:2-3*).

## When and how do we confront?

There are times in relationships it may be helpful and appropriate to lovingly confront or engage in communication about annoying behaviors. Before engaging in dialogue, it is helpful to reflect on a few things. Is the behavior flowing out of the personality or temperament of an individual? Generally, an individual’s personality does not change over time. For example, someone who tends to prefer structure and routine may change somewhat overtime but generally would not shift to being overly spontaneous. Additionally, if there are clear, sinful behaviors it is obviously appropriate to confront in the spirit of *Matthew 18*. Finally, consider the consequences that the behavior is having on others. Confronting may be more appropriate if the annoying behavior has a negative impact on others outside of just yourself.

When we do confront an individual in love – we do well to start with prayer and thanksgiving. Grounding ourselves in the Holy Spirit and gratefulness for the positive attributes of the individual are important before confronting. The individual we are approaching is much more than just the annoying behavior we are addressing. It is also helpful to seek to remove the beam out of my own eye before seeking to remove the mote in my brother or sisters’ eye (*Matt. 7:3*). Finally, remember each of us can be annoying at times and acknowledging this can help us confront in humility.

## Conclusion

Relationships can be both messy and beautiful. God calls us to engage life in His body with imperfect people that can have less than convenient behaviors or attributes at times. Imperfection is the reason for the Gospel. The reality is forbearing with our brother or sister showcases God’s grace – something on which we are all dependent. Forbearance is allowing your brother or sister to be who God wants and desires them to be, which at times is not necessarily who we want them to be. The beautiful gift of forbearance leads to peace, love, and unity in relationships. As we seek to become more like Christ, may we consider the forbearance Christ had and continues to have with each of us. May this reality continue to transform our hearts and lives to reflect His love to those around us.