

Marriage Forgiving and Forbearing

by John Piper

The main battle in life and marriage is to believe in the person and work of Christ, and to cultivate compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and bearing with one another.

Duration: 53:50

Scripture: Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:12

Topics: "Christian Marriage", "Forgiveness Grace"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of forbearance, forgiveness, and grace in marriage, using the analogy of a compost pile to symbolize dealing with flaws and sins in a relationship. It highlights the need for couples to focus on the beauty of their relationship beyond the 'cow pies' of imperfections, practicing forgiveness, forbearance, and grace rooted in the Gospel to maintain a strong and loving bond.

Transcript

Lord, there is a great cloud of witnesses, what a cloud of witnesses it is, lining the way. They finish the race as it were, they come around and they stand on the side and say, go. You can do this, you can stay in this marriage, you can love, you can forgive, you can do this.

We finished, finished well. What a cloud of witnesses we have. God, may we take heart and may you pour out a spirit of covenant-keeping love on us in this church.

Church membership covenant-keeping, marriage covenant-keeping, contract covenant-keeping, rental covenant-keeping, citizenship covenant-keeping. Oh God, may we be strong to keep our commitments, just like you did when you died, to seal it forever. I will make with them an everlasting covenant that I will not turn away from doing them good and I will put the fear of me in their hearts so that they will never turn away from me.

And that you bought with your blood. We have not yet suffered unto the shedding of blood in the covenant-keeping of our lives. Keep us faithful.

I pray in Jesus' name, amen. So you may recall now from last time that Noelle said, when I asked her what she wanted God said, namely, you cannot say too often that marriage is a model of Christ in the church. And I said I agreed with that and gave three reasons.

I'll mention two of them. One, saying it that way, saying that, which is based on Ephesians 5.32, lifts marriage up out of the sitcom sewer into the high, clear, bright, beautiful air of the glory of God where it was designed to be. And the second reason she's right is that saying that over and over again puts marriage on the foundation of grace because if we're modeling Christ in the church, He bought the church by grace.

He sustains the church by grace alone and therefore if marriage is a picture of that, marriage will be based on grace and that's what I began to talk about last time. But before that, there were two messages supporting that first reason, namely, that when you say that marriage has its main meaning in modeling Christ in the church, you're lifting it up into something glorious and I unpack that by saying it's the doing of God and the display of God. Marriage is pointing to something glorious.

Marriage itself is temporary. It's not ultimate, it's not God, it's not even close to God. It is temporary, pointing to something glorious and eternal.

Do you remember what Jesus said? Matthew 2230, in the resurrection they neither marry, in the resurrection, when you are raised from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven which is why my father, Bill Piper, will not be a bigamist in heaven at the resurrection enjoying 36 years of marriage with my mother and then after she died, 25 years of marriage with my stepmother and now they're both dead and one day they and he will be raised from the dead and he will not be a bigamist because in the resurrection there will be no marriage because the pointer vanishes into the reality. It's all about Christ, I mean that should help you grasp the wonder of what it is now so that you don't spend on it wrong investments. It is designed to point to something and then vanish into it.

So it should get started now in what it was meant to point to. So those were the first two messages and then last time I began to build on this second argument for Noel's statement, namely that you cannot say too often that marriage is a model of Christ in the church and the second argument is therefore it's built on grace. So last time I simply unfolded the general structure of Colossians 2 and Colossians 3 and the way Paul thinks.

Let me remind you of how that happened. Chapter 2 verses 13 and 14, 13 at the end, having forgiven us all our trespasses, so Christian husbands and wives, all their trespasses forgiven, cancelling the record of death that stood against us with its legal demands, this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. So the record of death that is mounting against you every day, because you sin every day, the record of death that is mounting against you every day is cancelled, how? By being nailed to the cross.

Now you know as well as I, nails in wood forgive no sin. So what does he mean? He means they went through a hand into the cross. They went through a foot into the cross and whose was it? Mine should have been.

It was the Son of God, which is why mine can be cancelled if I trust Him. It's the gospel. It's the glorious gospel that we should be telling everybody in the Twin Cities.

That's chapter 2. Marriage is built on that. Her sins were nailed to the cross. My sins were nailed to the cross.

That's the foundation of marriage. Then you get to chapter 3, especially verse 13, which we just heard. Second half of the verse, As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

And the way I described it was this vertical forgiveness, vertical grace, vertical justification is coming down from Jesus through the cross and I now am so thrilled by it, transformed by it, so reveling in it, that I now bend it out to my wife and she to me. And thus, marriage becomes a display of the covenant-keeping love. Then I asked the question, why, Piper, are you going about it this way? Why are you stressing forgiveness and forbearance instead of romance and enjoyment? And I gave you three reasons.

Here they are. One, because in marriage there will always be conflict for the simple reason that there will always be sin. And, I said, strangeness, idiosyncrasy, peculiarities about this person that get your goat always to the end of time.

And if you don't have a way to manage that, things are coming down. Secondly, hard, rugged work of forgiveness and forbearance makes possible the reawakening of affections that you thought were dead. And they weren't dead, they were dormant.

So that as you preserve the covenant safety by the hard work of forgiveness and forbearance, you preserve a place where the miracle of reawakening, of being in love, can happen again. And third, God gets glory when two very imperfect, very flawed, very different people forge a lifetime of faithfulness in the furnace of affliction by relying on Jesus. He gets so much glory from such a persevering faithfulness.

So for those three reasons, I'm going about it the way I'm going about it now. My aim today is to go further into this issue of forbearing and forgiving. We passed over it way too quickly last time.

And they're here in the text. I'll read it in just a minute, but I want to preface this with a caution. I'm aware, as I undertake to address issues of forbearing each other, enduring, bearing with, that there are sins against a spouse that push forbearance across the line into the assistance of sinning.

I'm thinking of things like assault, adultery, child abuse, drunken rage, addictive gambling, theft, lying that brings the family to ruin, which may require a redemptive separation. And I'm not going to talk about that tonight. That's big, that's heavy, that's controversial.

And I will preach a whole message or two on separation, divorce, and remarriage in a few weeks. So I just want you to know I'm aware that when I talk about forbearance, I understand there are horrific situations that are not easy to deal with. What I'm doing tonight is setting up a way of relating that I hope for hundreds of marriages will keep you from going there.

And for some, pull you right back from the brink, ready to step over there. And God willing, perhaps for a few, bring back together some whom the world calls divorced. And I hope that single people and children will so hear what this is that they will be ready someday, if God wills, to build a life together on this rock of grace.

So even though I know what I'm saying here is not the total solution to every kind of horrific situation, it is so true for hundreds and thousands of situations that might keep you from going there. So here we are, Colossians chapter 3. When Paul arrives in chapter 3 at verse 12, he has already laid a massive foundation in the person and work of Christ for our sins, the foundation of all of life, the foundation of all of marriage. Let me say real clearly, the main battle in life and the main battle in marriage is to believe in the person and work of Christ.

When I say believe, I mean trust it, embrace it, cherish it, treasure it, bank on it, breathe it. Let it shape you. I don't mean some little signature or some little attendance at a meeting or some little growing up in a

tradition.

I mean this is your life. Christ is my life. His cross is my life.

This is my joy. This is my hope. From this, I love my wife.

From this, I love my husband. Out of this, I find forbearance and forgiveness possible. The main battle in life is this.

Do we believe Him, trust Him, love Him, bank on Him, saturated with Him, drawing joy from Him? Is He our all, our life? There's the battle. It's not little tricks of how to get along in marriage. It's Christ being broken, being healed, being filled, being enabled to bend it out to another.

So fight at the right place. Fight at the wrong place, thinking, well, that's taken care of. I prayed that prayer when I was six.

Not the point. Now is He my all. What He does now, having laid that foundation, is really beautiful.

It is so beautiful. Many people have chosen these verses as their wedding text. I have done many weddings where this is what they wanted spoken about.

So here we are, verse 12. And the first thing He does now is to tell us what kind of clothes such people wear. Not these.

Moral clothes. Spiritual clothes. That's the image.

Put on. Are we together at verse 12? Put on then, on the basis of all that glorious Christ work, put on then, and now He's bringing Himself to just go straight to the admonition. He's got to say it three more ways.

Who you are. So get this now. Who are you? Three names for you.

Three glorious realities about your identity. Number one, put on then as God's chosen ones. Number two, as God's holy.

Three, as God's loved ones. Now He's about to tell us what kind of heart attitudes and external demeanors are the clothing that should clothe that kind of person. So you will only know how to put on these moral spiritual clothes that are about to be listed if you're this.

Chosen. Holy. Loved.

Let me just say a word about each of those. Chosen. Before the foundation of the world, God, according to Ephesians 1, 4, chose you for His own.

Before you ever existed. If you're a Christian, He chose you. If you're not a Christian, become a Christian and you will prove to be chosen.

Now Paul loved this truth. It thrilled him. You remember the words from Romans 8, 33? Who shall bring any charge against God's what? He left.

See what it did for him? I'm chosen. No charge can stand against me. It should have that emotional effect on you.

It's a thrilling doctrine that God moves on His people and He chooses them for Himself, makes them His own such that if they resist that truth, they resist being loved. Isn't that sad? To find fault with the doctrine of election is to find fault with being loved. Second, holy.

Put on a certain kind of behavior and heart disposition because you are holy. Are holy, so become holy. You see this? I am talking to you and you are chosen.

You are holy and you are loved. Now become these ways and a good way to describe those is holy. So what's this? Holy means when I chose you, you remember how it goes in Ephesians 1, 4? He chose us before the foundation of the world that we should be holy.

Set apart for Him, no longer common, no longer unclean, His own special possession or 1 Peter 2, 9 I think where it says we are a chosen people, a holy nation. That means not first that we've become good. We're becoming something but we are holy in that He took us out of the mob and He set us mine, mine, my chosen, my loved ones, my family, my bride.

And then He tells us how to dress ourselves. And the dressing, mercy and meekness and patience and kindness, that doesn't make you holy. In this first sense, you are holy.

Become what you are. There's the genius, there's the mystery of the Christian life. We are taken, put into Christ.

His righteousness is ours. We are holy in Him. And now the question is, well, what do I wear? What do I wear? And the answer is, put now, we'll go there in just a minute, these garments.

But one more, loved. Chosen, holy, loved. God shows His love for us.

God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ His Son died for us. Husbands, your main job is to feel this. Chosen, holy, loved.

Chosen by God. Holy unto God. Loved by God.

The main job of a husband is to know this, feel this, live in this, get hope from this, be changed by this, be thrilled by this, live out of this. That's the structure of the Bible. You are chosen.

You are holy. You are loved. I'm gonna tell you now how to dress in your marriage.

What kind of clothes to wear in your marriage. Wives, same thing. This is your life.

I am chosen. I am holy. I am loved.

That's the way a wife lives. Now, on that basis, those three identity statements for you, it tells us what inner conditions and external behaviors are the right kind of clothing. Fitting clothing, appropriate clothing to the chosen, the holy and the loved.

So let's read it. Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another. And if anyone has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.

Now, what I see there is pairs. Pairs. So I'm gonna break it down.

And in these pairs, the first part of the pair is an inner condition, and the second part of the pair is an external demeanor. And the demeanor flows from the inner condition. See if you see it that way.

Verse 12. The first clothing, compassion, kindness. Now, literally, old-fashioned literal translation, bowels of mercy, guts of mercy.

That's the way they talk. Guts meaning I'm moved. I'm moved here.

It's not just a thought. These are bowels of mercy. That's why I said this is an internal condition.

So mercy, compassion is something stirring down here. It's not an idea which is then brought to the will and kicked this will into doing a few nice things for somebody. This is stirring.

So we have to pursue that. Bowels of mercy and kindness. And my argument is that kindness is the external demeanor.

Kindness is the way you treat people when you are moved from inside by compassion or bowels of mercy. So there's one pair. Inner condition of a heart that is easily stirred and moved and made to pity and feel compassion and mercy, and then a behavioral style, which is kindness at home to wives and husbands.

Isn't it strange that we treat almost everybody else with civility but not, very strange, but true and sad and changeable? So husbands, sink your roots by faith into Christ through the gospel until you become more merciful inside. Sink your roots by grace into the gospel until change happens here of more mercy flowing up. Wives, sink your roots by grace into the gospel until there's more mercy here flowing out in kindness.

In other words, I'm saying fight the fight at the level of the gospel. Fight the fight by sinking your roots more in the gospel. It's not a technique.

It's a miracle of transformation that comes by being sunk with your roots down in the gospel. Second pair. Humility, meekness.

Literally, the word humility is lowliness. Lowliness. And meekness, the demeanor that follows.

When you're meek, you count others better than yourself and you are disposed to serve them and get under them and lift them up rather than lord it over them. But inside, it's coming from lowliness. Lowliness.

There's a marriage saver. Husbands and wives, uppity husbands, uppity wives. Selfish, self-centered, demanding, not lowly, broken-hearted, tender, contrite, yielding meekness.

We're talking miracles here for the likes of us, are we not? Look around at these guys in this room. You care, guys. You want to be this way? To be the other way is easy.

This is impossible. You want a challenge in your life? Get low. Be a servant.

Be meek. That's impossible. Except you'll sink your roots down into the gospel by grace, through faith, until you're broken.

When you hear God say, you're my chosen, you're my holy, you're my loved, it should make you lowly. And if it doesn't, you're not hearing it right. You need to plead with God.

Oh God, give me ears. Let me feel what He's saying. Let me feel the impact of being chosen freely by grace, being set apart freely by grace, being loved freely by grace.

Break me with that. Kill my pride. Humble me.

Get me down low so that I can lift up. Make me a servant in this family, wife and husband, wife and husband. We're not talking yet at the level of headship and submission.

This is so important to get right first, mutually. Now, the next pair is not a pair, sort of. Let's read from the beginning so you get it in the flow.

Verse 12, put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and loved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness. Two pairs. First inside, next demeanor.

Now, patience followed by two participles. Patience, comma, bearing with one another. That's number one.

Two. And if anyone has a complaint against another, forgiving one another, each other. So I'm gonna use, just because it sounds nice, the old-fashioned word forbearing.

Bearing with, forbearing one another and forgiving each other. So here's the pair that's not a pair. Patience, and the second half of the pair is two.

That's why I say it's not a pair, but it is a pair. Patience followed by forbearance and forgiveness. Forbearance and forgiveness flowing out of patience.

Now, what is patience? The Greek word makrathumia, translated literally by the King James, long-suffering. Makra, makro, thumia. Long-suffering.

Meaning, inside, if there's a short fuse, there should be a long fuse. A really, really long fuse. Long-suffering is what patience is.

And if there's this inner reality called patience, or long fuse, it burns so long, it rains on it before it gets to the dynamite. Leads to forbearance and forgiveness. So I don't think we've broken the pattern here of inner reality leading to external demeanor and behavior.

And the inner reality here is long-suffering. So husbands, sink your roots by faith into the gospel until your fuse gets longer. Wives, sink your roots into the gospel deeper by faith until your fuse gets longer.

That is, you become a long-suffering person. I wonder if you would agree with me that when you get to this point in the text, you start to say, you know, I think these inner conditions are connected to each other. Bowels of mercy, loneliness, long-suffering.

It is a heart that is easily moved by hurt of others and a heart that is broken and lowly, not selfish, proud, uppity, arrogant, lowly, and long-suffering. Where does anger come from? Anger's a marriage killer. I'll preach a sermon perhaps someday on this text coming at it from a totally different angle.

And the title of the sermon will be The Roots of Rage. It's all here. It's all here.

The roots of rage are here. That is the antidote. Here's the roots of rage.

Rage is the opposite of long-suffering. Long-suffering grows out of lowliness and bowels of mercy. Bowels of mercy and lowliness flow from knowing yourself loved, holy, and chosen.

Anger is rooted in not believing the Gospel. When I say believing, I mean not embracing, not cherishing, not treasuring, not being stunned and blown away that my sins are forgiven and I'm loved and I'm set apart for God and I'm chosen from eternity owing to nothing in myself. How could I ever hold anything against anybody? That's where anger comes from.

You don't believe it. And therefore, I'm gonna stay right at the center all my life in this pulpit. Because if you get the Gospel, if it clobbers you, if it makes you lowly, if it makes you compassionate, if it makes you long-suffering, everything changes.

A thousand counseling issues get solved if we get the Gospel. If we go deep, and I'm not saying this happens like bang! Did you get it tonight? Good. You don't have to do church anymore.

That's not it. Yes, there are wonderful, stunning moments with Christ. May some come tonight.

But it's a lifelong, that's why I'm saying, husband, sink your roots. Wives, sink your roots. That's a daily thing.

I do it every day. Every morning, I'm pushing my roots down into the Gospel, lest I drift away, lest I start to take it for granted, lest I cease to be amazed, because to the degree that John Piper is not amazed at his salvation, Noel pays. So, let me say a few closing words, perhaps, about forbearance and forgiveness, because that's where we are, and that's what I said I would talk about.

And you're waiting for the compost pile, perhaps. It's coming. Bearing with one another.

Are you with me there? Verses 12 and 13, end of verse 12. Patients are long-suffering, yielding first forbearance. What does that mean? Let's get real specific.

What does forbearance mean? The word, I'll give you a couple of uses of it in the New Testament, is almost always translated endure, or something like that. This is not a complimentary word to the relationship. Enduring one another, it doesn't sound hopeful, it doesn't sound positive.

Enduring one another, that's exactly what it says. Here's a couple of verses. Luke 9, 41.

Oh, faithless and twisted generation, Jesus said, how long am I to bear with you? There it is, that's the word. Faithless generation, I'm having to bear with you while I'm here. How long, I'm getting tired of it.

That's Jesus talking. First Corinthians 4.12, here's Paul talking. When persecuted, we endure.

That's the use of the word. So he says, now this is to the church and I'm applying it to marriage because marriage is the most intense, close, difficult relationship in the church. The church lives this way, marriages live this way.

And he says, put on the kind of clothes that a chosen, holy, and loved person should put on, namely, long-suffering leading to forbearance. Love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, endures all. The New Testament is not excessively romantic about relationships.

It's just tough, stay in them. Because if you stay in them, glorious things can happen. They really can.

They really can. And if you jump from relationship to relationship, glory is gone. Little bit of low satisfaction, maybe.

But glory, gone. And your life is about glory, not about low satisfaction. And the second word is forgive.

So first forbear and then forgive. There are several words for forgive in the New Testament. This one means freely, graciously give.

It's used most of the time not in context of forgiveness, just giving, graciously giving. Giving without exacting a payment. So when you give somebody something, you don't say, pay.

That's not this word. That's okay if you're selling something, but it's not this. So forgiving here is giving and not exacting, not demanding back.

And the context would be, in the relationship, somebody has done something and they've gotten into debt with you. They've hurt you. Word, neglect, something hurt me or made me mad.

And you could settle that by saying, now that person, she, he, should pay. I'm gonna make her pay. And we make people pay in various ways.

Get the last word, say an ugly word, you know, mope, don't show up in bed. There's lots of ways to make, you know, he's gonna pay because he did bad to me. That's not what's going on here.

This says, return good for evil without making her pay. That's a spirit of forgiveness. Do not return evil for evil, but bless.

Now what I find most helpful here is that both of these words are in the text. Forbear and forgive. Forbear and forgive.

Forgiveness says, I will not treat you badly because of your sins against me or your annoying habits. I will not treat you badly because of your sins against me and your annoying habits. That's what forgiveness is.

Forbearance says, usually to itself, not always, I'll write the star article about this week, about confrontation, which is in the title of the sermon and I'm not saying a word about it because I ran out of space. I'm already out of time, but I'll put it in the star. Usually forbearance says to itself, those sins against me and those annoying habits really bother me.

That's what forbearance says. And I won't hold them against you. If that weren't true, we wouldn't need this word endurance in the Bible.

This word is here because they don't go away, right? The habit that you wish were different doesn't go away. You've got to endure it. And when you bring the two together, forgiveness and forbearance, something amazing can be created.

You know, we're singles and those of us who've been married for 34 years, this is a no brainer. You marry a person, you don't know what they're gonna be like in 30 years. You don't know what they're gonna be like.

You're shooting in the dark. Well, not totally, but you don't know. It could be better than you ever dreamed.

You thought it would be B plus and it's A plus. Or it could be worse than you ever dreamed. You know, our forefathers who came up with wedding vows, which young people today try to massage into sad contemporary imitations, didn't make these wedding vows with their heads in the sand.

Their eyes were wide open to reality, to have and to hold from this day forward for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, to love, honor, cherish, till death do us part. There to I plight thee my troth. Do you have any idea what that means? I'll translate it.

Therefore, I pledge you my faithfulness. Worse, poorer, suffering, sickness. They knew what they were doing.

To make that our bond. Now for the compost pile. Trying to pull together forbearance, forgiveness, and all the things we've seen.

I'm closing with the compost pile. Picture your marriage. Now I said this was a discovery that Noelle and I made over the years.

I couldn't date it exactly, but I began to use it years ago in my wedding homilies when I preached to young couples. I would talk to them about the compost pile. Picture your marriage as a grassy field.

And you enter at the beginning full of hope and joy. And you look out on the field and you see beautiful flowers and grass stretching and rolling hills and trees. And it is beautiful.

You wanna walk in this all your days. The grass, the flowers, the hills, the sky, the warm breeze is not what happens to you. It's the relationship.

That's the analogy. I'm interpreting it for you. I'm describing your relationship.

And on the wedding day, I want this woman and I want this man. And we wanna be together and walk in the beautiful fields of green grass and spring flowers and trees and hills and bright sunshine and cool breezes. That's the way it's gonna be.

And before long, you step in a cow pie. And in some seasons of your marriage, they seem to be everywhere. This is not grass.

This is just manure. Late at night, they become especially prevalent when there's no sleep. There are more cow pies when you don't get enough sleep.

These are sins, flaws, idiosyncrasies, weaknesses, annoying habits in your spouse, and you try to forgive them and you try to forbear. And the problem is they can tend to dominate the relationship everywhere you step. It smells.

May not be true that they're everywhere. Just feels that way. I think the combination of forbearance and forgiveness leads to the creation of a compost pile.

Here at the compost pile, you and your wife, husband, you begin to shovel cow pies into this pile and you put a fence around it, hold them in, and you shovel them in. And you look at each other, and you simply admit that there are a lot of cow pies. You just say, there are a lot of cow pies in this field.

You and I bring a lot of cow pies to this relationship. So you start shoveling them into this fenced-in compost pile. And you say to each other, you know, we gotta do this because we're losing sight of the fact that we keep focusing on these cow pies.

That's all we're thinking about. I mean, we're looking for them to step in. So let's get them and throw them in one place.

Let's throw them in a pile. Compost pile. Compost can do some good.

So let's throw them there. And when we have to, we'll go there. We'll go there.

And we'll smell it, and we'll feel bad, and we'll deal with it as best we can. Then we'll walk away from the pile. We'll walk away from it.

And we'll set our eyes on the rest of the field. This is right at the heart of what I'm trying to say. Satan and our flesh can begin to take a few disappointments, a few frustrations, and multiply them so out of proportion that we think there's no green grass anywhere.

There are no flowers anywhere. There are no trees. There are no hills.

There's no sunshine, which is an absolute lie. And then we say to each other, we're gonna walk away from that pile, set our eyes on the rest of the field, and we're gonna pick some of our favorite paths and hills that we know are not strewn with cow pies. And we're gonna be thankful that that part of the field, that part of the field is sweet.

Might be a small part now, but that part is sweet. Our hands may be dirty, and our backs may ache from all this shoveling, but we know one thing. We will not pitch our tent by the compost pile.

We will go there when we must. This is the gift of grace that we will give each other again and again and again. We will only go there when we must.

We won't go live there. We won't retreat there. We won't lick our wounds there.

We won't pitch our tent there. We will only go there when we must. And that gift we will give to each other again and again and again.

Why? Because you and I are chosen and holy and loved. Gracious Father, everything I've talked about is only wrought by miraculous grace. And so I ask now for me and Noel, for my children, for this church, and for the representatives of Christ around the world, that that grace would be given.

That forbearance and forgiveness would flow out of long suffering, which is rooted in lowliness and bowels of mercy, which are rooted in being loved and holy and chosen, which are rooted in sovereign grace. Oh Lord, may that grace flow out to each other as we learn what it is to model Christ and the church. In his name we pray, amen.



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