

September 26, 1999 Morning  
Pastor Steven J. Cole

The Key To Reconciliation  
Genesis 45:1-15

Whenever I go to the airport, I enjoy watching when passengers get off an arriving flight. I don't know anything about the people or their relationships, except what I see there, but it's always moving to watch people craning their necks for a glimpse of their loved ones. I overhear them saying to each other, "No, I don't see him yet. No, he hasn't gotten off yet." Then suddenly, one of them exclaims, "There he is!" You'd think that the President himself was getting off that plane. If there are children waiting, they make a break through the crowd like a halfback who sees a hole in the line and they're the first to reach Grandpa or Dad or whoever it is. Soon the whole family is embracing and exchanging greetings. Often there are tears of joy, as loved ones are reunited after a long separation. It's a joy to watch. It's the joy of relationships.

It is not an exaggeration to say that relationships are the most important thing in life, because the two greatest commandments in the Bible have to do with right relationships—first toward God and then toward one another. Whenever you see broken relationships toward God or in the family or in the church, you know that it is not pleasing to God. God is in the business of reconciling broken relationships.

There is perhaps nothing so moving as witnessing a fractured family being reconciled and reunited. That's why Genesis 45 is such a moving chapter. We are allowed to look in on the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers after 22 years of separation and estrangement. After Judah's impassioned plea on behalf of Benjamin and their father (44:18-34), Joseph saw that his brothers had truly repented of their terrible sin of selling him into slavery. So he let himself go in a torrent of emotion, telling his brothers through his tears, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" He knew that his dad was alive, but he wanted to hear it again, just to make sure.

Imagine the rush of confusion and horror which swept over Joseph's brothers when they heard this Egyptian governor say, "I

am Joseph.” Judah had just finished his appeal when the governor’s chest began to heave with emotion. The brothers wouldn’t have known whether he was angry or what. Then he shouted something in Egyptian and all his attendants rushed out of the room. Then this man broke into prolonged loud sobbing. The text compresses the story, but as you know, it takes several minutes for someone who is sobbing to calm down enough to talk.

Then, of all things, he spoke in Hebrew! Until now he had spoken only in Egyptian through an interpreter. For 22 years they had spread the rumor that Joseph was dead, to the point that they believed it themselves. To hear Joseph speak was like hearing a corpse talk. And to hear this powerful ruler now say, “I am Joseph,” after what they had done to him, their blood ran cold. The word translated “dismayed” (45:3) means to be terrified. It is used to describe the feeling which swept over a group of men in battle when suddenly the enemy turned on them and they realized they were doomed (Judges 20:41). Joseph’s brothers thought, “This is it! We’ve had it!” They were struck speechless. In fact, up to verse 15, Joseph does all the talking.

The brothers’ shock over who this man was could only have been increased by what he said. They would have expected him to say, “You guys treated me like dirt. For 22 years I’ve been waiting for this moment. Now you’re going to get it.” But there was no hint of revenge. Instead, Joseph spoke kindly to them and showed every intention of treating them well. He promised to provide for them and their children through the coming years of famine. He finished by kissing not only Benjamin, who hadn’t been a part of their treachery against Joseph, but also each of his brothers, weeping on their shoulders. It must have blown them away. Finally, they were able to talk, and what a conversation it must have been!

Joseph shows us the key to being reconciled to those who have deeply hurt us, whether they are family members or friends:

The key to reconciliation is your attitude and the key to your attitude is submitting yourself to the sovereign God.

The remarkable thing about Joseph’s life was not his brilliance. It was not his administrative ability, although he was gifted there. It was his attitude, especially in response to unfair treatment.

And the reason for his attitude was his relationship to the sovereign God.

1. The key to reconciliation is your attitude.

The right attitude is at the center of good relationships. As you think about people who are easy to get along with, are they grumpy, negative, angry, bitter, vindictive, sarcastic, touchy? Of course not. They're pleasant, positive, relaxed, forgiving, kind, not quick to take offense or hold a grudge. These are attitudes. Reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers never would have taken place if Joseph had harbored a rotten attitude. His forgiving, kind, loving, caring, pleasant attitude, in spite of the horrible rejection and harsh treatment he had received from his brothers, opened the way for them now to be reconciled to him.

As hard a pill as it is to swallow, the key to being reconciled to a family member or friend from whom you are estranged lies in your attitude. I know what you are thinking: What about his or her attitude? I'll talk about that in a moment. Obviously, at some point their attitude also has to change for reconciliation to be complete. But often the key to bringing them to change is when they see how you have responded to the wrong things they have done to you. Often it is the offended person, like Joseph here, who must take the initiative in reconciliation.

When someone wrongs you, you have a choice to make. You may not think so, since your initial response is usually visceral: you feel angry or hurt. But after you cool down, you have an important choice to make. Many in Joseph's situation would have allowed the hurt feelings to grow into a monster that dominated their lives. They would become angry, bitter, hostile people. If they ever met these rotten brothers again, they would be gunning for them. Or at best, they would never let them forget what they had done and how much pain they had caused.

But there's another choice: You can respond as Joseph did. It may have taken him some time to work through things. It usually does. But he didn't stew about it for years. If he had, his bitter spirit would have precluded him from rising to the top in Potiphar's house and in prison. He must have dealt with his attitude early on. The sooner you get to work on it, the better, because the

Bible calls bitterness a root (Heb. 12:15), and as you know, a root is easier to pull out when you don't let it grow for years.

Joseph made a choice before God to forgive his brothers and to trust God to deal with them and to right the wrongs. To forgive means that you choose to absorb the pain and loss caused by the other person and they go free, even when they don't deserve it. Forgiveness is costly for the one doing the forgiving. When God forgives our sins in Christ, it doesn't mean that He brushes them aside. It means that Jesus Christ paid the penalty so that we could go free. Jesus said that just as God has forgiven us, so we must forgive others from our hearts (Matt. 18:21-35).

So the key to reconciliation is your attitude. Ask God to give you His love and forgiveness toward the one who has wronged you. You've got to focus on your attitude, not on the other person's behavior or attitude. It's clear that Joseph had forgiven his brothers long before they came to a place of repentance.

You're probably thinking, "But I don't feel forgiving toward that person. If I'm honest with my feelings, I'd have to say that I want that person to pay for what he did to me. How can I have a forgiving attitude when I feel like inflicting revenge or at least praying the imprecatory Psalms?" The key to reconciliation is your attitude. And,

2. The key to your attitude is submitting yourself to the sovereign God.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of Joseph throughout these chapters is the centrality of God in his life. This is such an important concept, if only we could grasp it in our daily lives. So often, even for Christians, God is a part of their lives, but He's not at the center. He is a spoke in the wheel of life, but He's not the hub. But for Joseph, everything centered on God.

When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, he immediately thought of God: "How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" (39:9). When Joseph was in the dungeon and the cupbearer and baker had their dreams, Joseph's response was, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (40:8). When he was called before Pharaoh, who said, "I hear you can interpret dreams," Joseph said, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable an-

swer." (41:16). And in giving Pharaoh the interpretation, Joseph used God's name four times to underscore to Pharaoh that it was God who was revealing what was about to happen (41:25, 28, 32).

When Joseph's wife bore him two sons, he gave them names that bore witness to God's faithfulness. He named the first Manasseh, saying, "God has made me forget all my trouble ..."; and he named the second Ephraim, saying, "God has made me fruitful ..." (41:51, 52). When Joseph's brothers came to buy grain, even though Joseph wanted to disguise himself from them, he could not hide his relationship with God. He told them, "Do this and live, for I fear God" (42:18). When they returned with Benjamin, Joseph, still disguising himself, said to his brother, "May God be gracious to you, my son" (43:29). Joseph's steward had told the worried brothers concerning the money returned to their sacks, "Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks" (43:23). Obviously, Joseph had told the steward to say that.

At the end of Genesis, when Joseph's brothers feared that he would pay them back now that their father was dead, he replied, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (50:19, 20). Just before his death, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you, and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (50:24, 25).

From the first to the last, the sovereign God was at the center of Joseph's life. Notice this emphasis in our text: "... for God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5); "And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth" (45:7); "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh ..." (45:8); "Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, "God has made me lord of all Egypt"'" (45:9).

Some have wondered if Joseph's telling his father of his splendor in Egypt was pride on Joseph's part. But in light of his relationship to God, I think not. Rather, by emphasizing his position and wealth, Joseph was trying to get his brothers and father to see that God had worked everything out right, so that they would

trust in God and be reconciled to one another. And, he wanted Jacob to hear of his circumstances so that he would praise God for His ways, which had worked together for good. That's why God is the subject of Joseph's first sentence to his father (45:9). He wanted his father to know what God had done.

There are two practical lessons for us which flow from Joseph's relationship to God:

*(1) You must learn to relate God to every event in your life, whether good or seemingly bad.* Joseph had some things happen to him which were very unfair and unpleasant. He went in obedience to his father to find out the welfare of his brothers, only to have them sell him into slavery. He resisted Potiphar's wife and maintained his moral purity only to be falsely accused and thrown in prison. He was kind and sensitive toward the cupbearer and baker in interpreting their dreams, only to have the cupbearer forget him for the next two years. And yet Joseph related God to all these unfair events.

To do this, you've got to look past what seem to be the primary causes, to God who is really the primary cause. It looks like somebody mistreated you; but really, it is God disciplining you as a loving father disciplines his child. The apostle Paul did this. To all outward appearances, it looked like he was a prisoner of Caesar. But he never referred to himself that way. Rather, it was always, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Yes, Rome had wrongly thrown Paul in prison; but it wasn't Rome—it was the Lord! Even if it's Satan who is causing you problems (which is relatively rare), he can't do anything which God hasn't allowed him to do. God's purpose in all the things which seem to be against you is to bring ultimate glory to Himself and good to you as you trust Him. That leads to the second lesson. Once you see that God is related to every event, then ...

*(2) You must submit to God's sovereignty in every event in your life.* This is a matter of the heart, where you trust that He is good and that He is in control, even when it seems otherwise. Your only other option is to believe that what happens is a matter of chance. That's the evolutionist's explanation for life: We're here as the product of chance plus time. Maybe we can pull some of our own strings to improve our lot, but some things are just due to chance. But many Christians, who would deny evolution, live as if it were

true when they complain about trials as if they've been dealt a bad hand in the game of life. When things go wrong, they don't stop to acknowledge that God is dealing with them and to submit to His sovereignty.

I'm not talking about a blind resignation to events, where we blame God for our own irresponsibility. We are responsible for our actions, and yet God is sovereign over all and we must submit to Him. Each person is responsible for his own sin, and yet God overrules even the sinful things people do and uses them to accomplish His purpose. When you submit to God's ultimate sovereignty, you can say with Joseph, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." The key to reconciliation with those who have hurt you is your attitude, and the key to your attitude is relating every event in your life to God and submitting to His loving sovereignty in those events.

I still haven't answered the questions, "What about those who have wronged me? Don't they need to change? Can there be true reconciliation if they don't repent?" For there to be complete reconciliation, all parties concerned must come under the lordship of Jesus Christ. If Joseph's brothers had refused to repent of their sinful ways, there could only have been a strained truce, at best. We live in a sinful world, where God has given people freedom of choice. Sometimes, in spite of our having the right attitude and being rightly related to God, those who have wronged us continue in their sinful ways. Not every relationship will work out neatly or quickly. But when it does, it's worth all the time and effort expended to make it right.

But whether it works out or not, we each are responsible for our own attitude before God. When my attitude is right and God is the center of my life, often it will motivate the one who wronged me to deal with his sin before God. When he sees that I harbor no resentment or bitterness for what he did to me, often he will be drawn to the God who has given me such grace. Assuming you have a right attitude before God, I conclude by giving two action points on how to deal with the one who has wronged you.

## Conclusion

1. *Express your forgiving, loving spirit, first non-verbally, then verbally, at the proper time.* Joseph forgave his brothers in his heart long before he expressed it to them. He waited to see their repentance before extending forgiveness, but he didn't wait to deal with his bitterness and to forgive them in his heart. That's an important distinction! God has made provision for the forgiveness of sinners before they repent. But He doesn't extend forgiveness to them, and there can be no reconciliation between God and the sinner, until the sinner repents. Since we are to forgive as God has forgiven us, it seems to me that we must maintain that distinction.

So what do we do until the other person repents? Do we sit with our arms folded, thinking, "When he comes crawling, begging for forgiveness, I'll do it, but not until then!" If that's your attitude, you haven't forgiven the person as God wants you to. If you've forgiven him, you won't make him pay, because you absorb the cost of his wrong. If you've forgiven him, you won't be hoping he gets zapped, but you'll be praying and earnestly desiring that he will come into a right relationship with God. You'll have the joy and peace of Christ in your heart, and you'll want the same for him.

So what do you do while you wait for him to repent? Hard as it is, you look for opportunities to do kind things for him. Remember, it's the kindness of God that leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). God Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men (Luke 6:35). Just as Joseph was kind to his brothers by returning their money, stuffing their sacks with extra grain, feeding them, talking kindly to them, and now, promising to provide for them and their families, so we must do kind things for those who have wronged us.

Josephine Ligon ("Your Daffodils are Pretty," *Christianity Today* [3/2/79], p.18) tells of a family named Parsons in the town where she grew up who preached and practiced forgiveness. Once Josephine and several of her third grade friends put a handful of pencil shavings into the Parsons girl's sandwich, just to be mean and to make her mad. But she didn't get mad. Instead, the next day, without any sign of repentance from her persecutors, the Parsons girl brought everyone in the class a large, delicious, hand-decorated cookie which said, "Jesus loves you." Over 40 years

later Josephine Ligon still remembered that demonstration of forgiveness more than any sermon.

When the time is right and the person seems to be sorry for what he's done, express your forgiveness verbally. You need to do it privately, as Joseph did. You shouldn't paper over the offense or pretend that it wasn't serious. Twice Joseph states their crime of selling him (45:4, 5). But his focus wasn't on their crime, but on how God overruled things. He wanted to help his brothers trust in the sovereign God who can even use our past sinfulness for His glory.

Also, express your feelings, not just words. Joseph openly wept and he hugged and kissed each of his brothers (45:14, 15). People need to feel that they're forgiven, not just to hear it.

2. *As God gives opportunity, help the estranged ones to see God's perspective.* Joseph explains to his brothers how God was at work in this whole process (45:5-8). If he had explained things earlier, they would not have been teachable, but now they are ready to listen. This may involve more pain for you as you wait for God to deal with them. While Joseph waited for God to deal with his brothers, he also waited to see his father, which he badly wanted to do. Like Joseph, you may have to wait for years before the person comes to repentance or before there can be a face to face meeting. But then, when God works it out, you can help him to interpret the past events from God's perspective.

You may even have the joy of leading the one who wronged you to personal faith in Jesus Christ. The good news is that though we all have wronged God, through Christ's death on the cross He paid the penalty we deserved. As you model His love and forgiveness, it could open the door for the one who wronged you to experience God's forgiveness, which is his greatest need. God has given to us "the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19). If you will deal with your attitude by forgiving those who have wronged you and by submitting yourself to the sovereign God's dealings with you, He will use you as His agent of reconciliation to those who have wronged you. And you will know the joy of restored, loving, God-centered relationships.