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FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER

Genesis 50:15-21

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Genesis Lesson 84

FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER Genesis 50:15-21

Three mean-looking guys on motorcycles pulled into a truck stop cafe where a truck driver, a little guy, was sitting at the counter, quietly eating his lunch. The three thugs saw him, grabbed his food, and laughed in his face. The truck driver didn't say a word. He got up, paid for his food and walked out.

One of the bikers, unhappy that they hadn't succeeded in provoking the little man into a fight, bragged to the waitress, "He sure wasn't much of a man, was he?"

The waitress replied, "No, I guess not." Then, glancing out the window she added, "I guess he's not much of a truck driver, either. He just ran over three motorcycles."

The familiar saying, "Don't get mad, just get even" sums up the world's philosophy of how to deal with someone who wrongs you. But in contrast to the world's way, God prescribes a radical approach when we are wronged: We are to be kind and tender-hearted, forgiving one another just as God in Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32).

It's easy to say that, but it's tough to apply it. The difficulty increases in proportion to how badly you've been hurt. When you've been hurt badly, you don't feel like forgiving the person, even if he repents, at least not until he's suffered a while. You want him to know what it feels like. You want him to pay.

Some of you are struggling with those feelings right now. Your pain may be from a recent situation, or it may go back for years. But if you're bitter and unforgiving, you're not obeying the two great commandments, to love God and to love others. Bitterness not only displeases God; it spreads to others, defiling many (Heb. 12:15). So if we want to please God, we must ask, How can we root out bitterness and truly forgive those who have wronged us?

Joseph's life is a classic lesson on how to overcome bitterness and learn to forgive. He had been repeatedly hurt, but he didn't develop a trace of bitterness. His own brothers had planned to kill him, but sold him into slavery at the last moment. As Potiphar's slave, Joseph's life is a classic lesson on how to overcome bitterness he was faithful and upright, but was falsely accused of attempted rape by Potiphar's wife. He spent years in prison and was forgotten by a man he had helped, who could have pled his case with Pharaoh. Yet in spite of all this, Joseph never grew bitter toward God or toward those who had wronged him.

Now, after his father Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers began to worry. They couldn't forget how they had wronged him. They knew that he had forgiven them 17 years before. But now that dad was dead, would Joseph pay them back for all the wrong they had done to him? So they sent a message to Joseph saying that their father, before his death, had charged them to tell Joseph to forgive their sin against him. The brothers may have been making this up, because Jacob would have talked directly to Joseph if he had been concerned about the matter. But at any rate, Joseph's response shows that he truly had forgiven his brothers. From Joseph's attitude in these verses, we can learn how to forgive others who have wronged us:

To forgive others, we must take our proper place before God and express the proper attitude toward others.

Joseph's attitude was the key to his great success in life. Notice, first, his attitude toward God.

1. To forgive others, we must take our proper place before God.

When Joseph's brothers approached him, his spontaneous response was to weep, which showed his tender heart. Then he reassured his brothers and asked: "Am I in God's place?" (50:19). Even though Joseph was the second most powerful man on the face of the earth, a man who could have given the command and had his brothers imprisoned or executed with no questions asked, Joseph didn't forget that he was not in God's place. He assumed his proper place under God.

Joseph's question is a good one to ask yourself when you're tempted to withhold forgiveness or to seek vengeance against someone who has wronged you: Am I in God's place? Joseph was powerful in the world's eyes, but he knew he was never big enough to take God's place. To take our proper place before God involves three things:

A. We must allow God to be the judge of all.

The Lord says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" (Rom. 12:19). He's the only competent judge, the one who knows the thoughts and intentions of every person's heart. We need to trust Him to deal rightly with each person.

Most of us want God's justice for the guy who wronged us, but God's mercy for ourselves. But to love our neighbor as ourselves means that we will want God's mercy for him, just as we want it for ourselves. I'm convinced that one reason Joseph forgave his brothers is that he always remembered that he had no claim against God, no matter how severe the treatment he received. He allowed God to be the judge of his brothers and of himself. Taking our proper place before God also means:

B. We must humble ourselves under God's sovereignty.

When terrible things happen to you, you have two options: Either God is sovereign and, for some reason, He allowed it to happen; or, God isn't sovereign and this one slipped by Him. Rabbi Kushner, in his best-selling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, argued that God means well, but He can't quite cope with all the evil in the world. I find that "solution" awfully depressing. What kind of God is that?

The Bible declares that God is the sovereign God who "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). Nothing, including the evil deeds of wicked men, can thwart God's plan. Joseph saw this clearly. He says to his brothers, "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" (50:20). What a great perspective to have when people wrong you!

I don't say that glibly. Some terrible things have happened to godly people down through the centuries. Missionaries have been slaughtered for trying to take the gospel to people who desperately

needed to hear it. Godly pastors have been falsely accused and driven from their churches. Faithful spouses have been devastated when their mates left them for someone else. Innocent children have been abused by a parent they trusted. The list could go on and on.

The Bible doesn't hide this sort of thing. John the Baptist, the man most highly praised by Jesus Christ, was beheaded at the whim of a drunken king. The apostle James was murdered by a tyrant as a young man. Many of God's choicest servants were persecuted and murdered (see Heb. 11:36-38). But none of that threatens the sovereignty of God.

You may not like it, but you've got to submit to the sovereignty of God in your life when someone wrongs you. Although you may not know the reason this side of eternity, God sovereignly allowed this person to wrong you for some purpose. To forgive the person as God commands, you must submit to God's mighty hand in the situation.

So to take our proper place before God means allowing Him to be the judge of all; humbling ourselves under His sovereignty; and,

C. We must believe that God is good in all His ways.

"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." That's the Old Testament equivalent of Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

The classic philosophic problem of suffering revolves around the question of how God can be both sovereign (or all-powerful) and good at the same time. If He were good, then He wouldn't will our suffering; if He were powerful, He would do something about it. Yet we suffer. Thus, God must be either weak or not good.

There are several fallacies in that syllogism. It ignores the presence of sin in the world as the reason for suffering. Also, it assumes that all suffering is bad. But in our fallen world, God often brings great good out of terrible suffering. Also, the argument assumes that God must alleviate suffering immediately, while the

Bible affirms that God's final solution will only come when He creates a new heavens and earth.

When someone wrongs you, you need to be on guard. Satan tempted Eve by getting her to doubt the goodness of God. He implied that God was withholding something good by keeping the forbidden fruit from her. The devil will tempt you by whispering, "If God really cared for you, He wouldn't have let this happen." No doubt Joseph often had to resist that temptation over the years. But in each case, Joseph affirmed by faith, "They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

Elisabeth Elliot, whose first husband was murdered by the savage people he was trying to reach for Christ, and whose second husband died of cancer, wrote, "The experiences of my life are not such that I could infer from them that God is good, gracious and merciful necessarily. To have had one husband murdered and another one disintegrate, body, soul and spirit, through cancer, is not what you would call a proof of the love of God. In fact, there are many times when it looks like just the opposite. My belief in the love of God is not by inference or instinct. It is by faith." (Cited by James Boice, *Genesis* [Zondervan], 3:332.)

There's a way you can tell whether you have taken your proper place before God or not: *Do you grumble about your circumstances or about the people who have mistreated you?* If you do, you aren't in submission to the sovereign goodness of God. You may not think you're grumbling against God. You'd say you're angry with the person who did you in. But really, you're angry at God, grumbling against Him for allowing it to happen. You've got to deal with your attitude before God or you'll live and die a bitter, unforgiving person. You must come to the place where you can say, "That person meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, and I submit to and trust His purpose in it all."

2. To forgive others we must express the proper attitude toward them.

Our attitude is often revealed in our spontaneous reaction. Joseph wept. I think he wept because he suddenly saw that his brothers still didn't trust him, even after 17 years of what Joseph thought was a restored relationship. They were trying to use their dead father's influence to protect themselves, when there wasn't

any need for protection. Joseph's attitude reflects three qualities we must express if we want to forgive others:

A. To forgive others, we must be humble.

When somebody wrongs you, it's easy to become proud. You start thinking, "I'm better than that jerk! I'd never do to anybody what he did to me." That proud spirit leaks out in a lot of ways that prevent you from truly forgiving the other person. But Joseph here comes across with a humble spirit. He's not lording it over his brothers, even though he could have. He puts himself on their level, under God, and lets them know that they're forgiven. He shows us how to express true humility in forgiving those who have offended us.

1) You don't use your power to make the other person pay for what he did. Joseph could have made his brothers pay dearly for their sin. He could have enslaved, imprisoned, or killed them and their children. He could have let them sweat under the fear that someday the axe might fall. But Joseph reassured his brothers with the words, "Do not be afraid."

The real test of forgiveness is when you have the power to make the other person pay, but you choose not to use it. Forgiveness absorbs the wrongs others have done without exacting payment. If there's payment, there's no need for forgiveness.

2) You don't keep score. Joseph didn't say, "You guys owe me big time. So now that dad's gone, pay up." No, Joseph wasn't keeping score.

There are Christians who carry scorecards. They keep track of every wrong their mate has ever done. They stay in power by reminding them of the score. They can't forget what someone at church said about them. It doesn't matter if the person has sought their forgiveness. Like a cow chewing its cud, they keep bringing it up: "Do you know what Mrs. Jones said about me?"

After the Civil War, Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There she bitterly cried that Union soldiers had destroyed its limbs and trunk. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least for sympathy for her loss. After a brief silence, the general said, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it."

That's good counsel: Throw away the scorecard! Forgive and forget it! Joseph had named his firstborn son Manasseh, which means "making to forget," because he said, "God has made me to forget all my trouble" (41:51). Forgetting doesn't mean having amnesia. It means that you make a deliberate decision to put the incident behind and not bring it up for ammunition again.

3) *You don't put the offender down.* Often, we extend forgiveness in a way that makes the other person feel beneath us. We use his offense to make him feel like the scum of the earth. We come across as the most big-hearted guy on the earth to forgive his offense. But Joseph didn't do that with his brothers. He put himself on the same level they're on, under God.

4) *You don't take offense easily.* If Joseph had been proud of his forgiving spirit, he would have been offended at his brothers' plea. They hadn't understood his real motives and it hurts to be misunderstood, especially when you mean well. "How dare they imply that I haven't forgiven them? How can they be so ungrateful?" But instead of being offended, Joseph was grieved because his brothers still lived under a cloud of fear and mistrust.

Some people are always reading between the lines, assigning wrong motives to the other guy. A few years ago, I went to call on a man who had left the church. He told me that our elders were unfriendly. I asked him which elders were unfriendly. He named one. I asked what this man had done. "He walked right past me at church and didn't even look at me or say hello." I said, "He probably had something else on his mind. I walk past people at church every week without saying hello, but it doesn't mean I'm unfriendly or don't like them! If you think that elder has something against you, go to him and get it cleared up." But he wouldn't do it. If you're easily offended, you're proud, and you'll never be able to forgive others.

5) *You don't remind the offender of how you were right and he was wrong.* Joseph's brothers came and fell down before him (50:18). Guess what flashed into his mind? His dreams from years before! But Joseph didn't say, "Hey, guys, remember my dreams? I was right and you were wrong." God had vindicated Joseph and exalted him, but Joseph didn't exalt himself.

If you have a humble attitude toward those who wronged you, you don't bring up the past as ammunition, to remind them how you were right and they were wrong. Instead, you let it drop and you try to make them feel at ease.

Humility is the first ingredient in a proper attitude toward those who have wronged you.

B. To forgive others, we must speak the truth in love.

Joseph's brothers didn't say to him, "If we wronged you somehow, we're sorry," as if it was an accident. They were honest in admitting that they sinned against him (50:15, 17). For his part, Joseph didn't say, "Hey, no big deal. I know you didn't mean to hurt me." Rather, he was gently honest when he said, "You meant evil against me."

True forgiveness doesn't deny the offense or cover it as if it didn't hurt. But neither is it brutal in rubbing it in. For healing to take place, the offended person needs to admit his guilt and know that you heard him. Joseph's brothers needed to hear him agree that they had wronged him, because they couldn't be sure he had forgiven them until they were sure that the offense was in the open.

Two questions about forgiveness come up at this point. I can only touch on them briefly. First, *Does forgiveness require that I don't press charges when someone has criminally wronged my family or me?* I believe that you may forgive an offender personally, but for the protection of society and the upholding of justice, go ahead and prosecute. God has ordained government to punish wrongdoers and to carry out justice. So forgiving a person doesn't necessarily mean that I must drop the charges, although God at times may lead me to do so.

The second question is, *Should I forgive a person who is not repentant?* The Bible is clear that we are to forgive just as God has forgiven us. God doesn't extend forgiveness until we repent. But, God aggressively offers forgiveness to us and seeks through His kindness to bring us to repentance. He paid the price for our forgiveness in the death of His Son while we were still His enemies. The barrier to reconciliation wasn't with God; it was our own lack of repentance.

So we must distinguish between forgiving the person in our heart and extending forgiveness to him verbally. We must forgive the person in our heart before he repents, which means that we will sincerely pray for God's mercy toward him; we will look for ways to be kind; we will make it clear that we want to restore the relationship. We've got to root out our bitterness by submitting to the sovereign goodness of God. Then, the moment the offender repents, like the father of the prodigal son, we rush to welcome and embrace him. That leads to the third aspect of our attitude toward others:

C. To forgive others, we must actively care.

Joseph could have said, "I forgive you guys. Now get out of my life!" But instead, he provided personally for them and their families (50:21). His words of forgiveness proved themselves in his kind deeds long after the fact. Words are nothing if they aren't backed up by action. If you say that you forgive someone, but you couldn't care less what happens to him after that, you haven't really forgiven. A forgiving spirit shows itself in kind deeds.

Conclusion

Dr. Henry Brandt tells of a man he visited in Uganda. As they drove to his home, they passed a huge, beautiful home. The man told Dr. Brandt that he used to own that house. They headed out a dirt road and pulled up to a mud shack. The only furniture inside on the dirt floor was a wood packing crate, which the two men sat upon. The man related how he used to be a wealthy businessman. One day Idi Amin's soldiers came and took his Mercedes. He burned with anger as he saw them driving his car through the streets. Then they took his business. He was even angrier. Finally they took over his home for their headquarters. He moved to this mud hut.

One day a missionary stopped by the mud hut and told this man about God's love in Christ. The man threw the missionary out, but he kept coming back. The man finally accepted Christ and as a result, he was able to forgive those soldiers who had taken away all of his material possessions. He told Dr. Brandt, "Because through Christ I have forgiven those soldiers, I am the richest man in all of Uganda."

Bitterness holds your soul in bondage and hinders God's blessings from flowing to you and through you. Forgiveness frees you to experience God's abundant grace and to make you a channel of that grace even toward those who wronged you. God has not put anyone through anything He Himself was not willing to experience. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to seek our welfare, but was rejected and killed. He suffered, the just for the unjust, in order to offer us God's forgiveness. You may never in this life understand the why of your wrong treatment. But Jesus understands, because He suffered much more than any of us ever could. If we will learn to submit to His sovereign goodness when we are wronged and assume an attitude of humility, honesty in love, and caring toward those who have offended us, we will grow to know Him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If vengeance is wrong, how do you explain the imprecatory psalms? Should we ever pray those psalms against our enemies?
2. How can a victim of rape, child abuse, or some terrible crime honestly believe that God meant it for good?
3. How do you get the feeling of forgiveness when you don't have it?
4. Agree/disagree: A person can truly forgive and yet press charges against the offender?

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