

The Struggle to Accept Forgiveness

Genesis 50:15-21

This is the fifth sermon in a series entitled, "The Struggles of a Yoked Life"

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Sermon Text, Genesis 50:15-21

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Sermon, "The Struggle to Accept Forgiveness"

For five years beginning in 2001, I served as a hospice chaplain for Blessing Hospice in Pike County, Illinois; that was in addition to my regular duties as the pastor of the Bright Star Parish. Serving as a hospice chaplain was a wonderful learning experience for me, and I was blessed to be part of some wonderful conversations.

Whenever we enrolled a new patient, it was my job to talk to him or her and complete a spiritual assessment. Part of making people comfortable in their last days was making sure that they were comfortable in their spiritual life. One lady especially stands out to me. I remember sitting in her living room; her daughter and granddaughter seated nearby. I don't remember the patient's name, so let's just call her Marie. I do remember that she was a tiny woman; weighing maybe a hundred pounds.

As I worked through Marie's spiritual assessment, I could tell that something was weighing on her heart. I asked her if she had the assurance of knowing that her sins were forgiven, and she just kind of nodded half-heartedly. I didn't want to press, but I told her that there was nothing she had done that God couldn't forgive. Her eyes kind of lit up at the hope I was offering to her.

Then I told her the story of King David, and—

- How he had lusted after another man's wife, a woman named Bathsheba
- How he summoned Bathsheba and committed adultery with her while her husband was away at war.
- How he learned that she had become pregnant

- How he ultimately had the husband murdered in order to cover up his own crime of passion and lust.

Then I looked right into Marie's eyes and I said, "Surely, Marie, you haven't murdered anyone, have you?" And this tiny, bent over woman gave me this look that I'll never forget, and I thought, "Dear God, she's done it! She's actually murdered someone!"

Marie didn't say another word; but I got the impression that if her daughter and granddaughter weren't sitting there, that I would've had a much more interesting conversation. I am certain of one thing, however, and that is that Marie was carrying a load of guilt, so I read David's prayer for forgiveness in Psalm 51 and then prayed with Marie. She died a few days later; I like to think that I helped her find the assurance of forgiveness she so desperately sought.

Today's Old Testament lesson features ten brothers who likewise struggled with accepting forgiveness. They had plotted to kill Joseph but instead they "settled" for selling him into slavery. Now, with the death of Jacob, their guilt comes bubbling up to the surface once again. It reminds me of a psalm David wrote years later:

My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear (Psalm 38:4).

That seems to express the feelings of the ten brothers. And I suspect many of us have identified with that psalm at some point in our life: **My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.**

Bible scholars will tell you that Joseph is an Old Testament representation of Jesus Christ.:

- Joseph, like Jesus, was rejected by his own people
- In a sense, Joseph "dies." At least as far as his brothers were concerned, Joseph was dead.
- But then Joseph "comes back to life."
- And when he comes back to life, he has been exalted to the right hand of Pharaoh, just as Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
- Joseph feeds the multitudes.
- Joseph delivers God's chosen people.
- And, for our purposes today, Joseph forgave those who had betrayed him.

We saw that last week when we studied chapter 45. But now, in chapter 50, Jacob is gone, and the brothers are convinced that they are no longer in good standing with the brother whom they had so grievously wronged.

So they approach their brother Joseph and say, "Before Dad died, he said you have to forgive us."

Doesn't that sound a little concocted to you? Let me translate this for you: *"Dad says you have to forgive us!"*¹

Clearly, Joseph was hurt; in his mind, he had forgiven his brothers back in chapter 45. So what was going on in chapter 50? Apparently the ten brothers had not fully accepted the

¹ Petulantly, like a child.

forgiveness which had been extended to them. In today's Western vernacular, we would say that the brothers had not forgiven themselves. Their guilt was still a burden to them. In fact, they were overwhelmed by their guilt.

You don't have to look very hard to find a book written by some psychologist about forgiving yourself. But did you realize that the Bible never tells us that we need to "forgive our self." That doesn't mean it's wrong to forgive ourselves; I think the concept of forgiving yourself is simply a by-product of the society in which we are living. After all, Western society has become very "me" oriented. We've become all about the self and personal satisfaction: the idea of forgiving yourself fits right into that frame of mind.

Ultimately, forgiveness comes from God. And our task, then, as sinners, and as people who may be overwhelmed by guilt is to accept the forgiveness which has already been extended to us. And if we can accept God's forgiveness, then we are freed to forgive ourselves.

For some of us, that may mean we have to re-learn who God is and what God is. We may have to learn to accept the fact that God is love. God is not sitting at his computer waiting to hit the "smite" button and smash you like an insignificant little bug.

God is not in the business of condemnation. Yes, condemnation is a part of what God does. But God's primary business plan is centered around life and growth and fruitfulness. Take a look at John 15:

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful...

⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

God is a Gardener; gardeners aren't in the demolition business; they are in the growth business. They are in the business of producing a harvest. However, pruning is necessary in viticulture.

So how am I to avoid being pruned? The answer is simple: *Stay connected to Jesus Christ.* That sounds an awful lot like our mission statement: **We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.**

And once we're connected to Jesus Christ, then the promise of Romans 8:1 belongs to us:

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

So how are we to fully accept the forgiveness of God? There are probably some 12-step programs you can read about in one of the many books which have been published about forgiving yourself. I'm going to simply offer three recognitions which will help you to open your eyes to the grace of God.

We've already addressed the first recognition: Come to grips with God's grace. This may involve a struggle: remember how Jacob struggled with God when he was overcome with guilt for the way he had treated his twin brother Esau? But if you have genuinely repented of your sin before God, and connected yourself to Jesus Christ, then God has truly forgiven you, just as God forgave King David for raping Bathsheba and arranging the murder of her husband.

The second recognition is come to grips with the fact that we serve God, not our feelings. If we serve our feelings, then we make our feelings our master. When that happens, we are really saying to God, "Look, you don't really know what you're doing. You've got no business forgiving me for what I did. I know what's best for me, and I'm not going to forgive myself."

I don't want to pile more guilt on you when I'm preaching a sermon about overcoming guilt, but when we do that, we make ourselves out to be a better judge than God. And that's really a form of idolatry because we've put ourselves above God.

I know it may be hard to accept, but God has forgiven you; all you need to do is accept God's grace. Don't waste time feeling guilty.

And that leads us to our third recognition: come to grips with the fact that the promises God are meant for you and not just someone else. 1 John 1:9 reminds us that—

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And John 8:36 affirms that "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

I fully recognize that even though our sins have been forgiven, the consequences of our sin remain

- Joseph was still in Egypt
- Your car fender may still be dented
- You may still have doctor's bills to pay.
- You may still have to serve that detention after school.

And the list goes on. But God is able to find a way to bring great good out of whatever happened when you blew it.

- Joseph was elevated to a position of power in Egypt.

For we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Why? Because God our Father is an excellent gardener.