

Message #11
Joseph

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10/27/2024

JOSEPH AND JUDAH AND THE SEARCH FOR REPENTANCE GENESIS 44

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Rumor has it that there is a holiday of sorts that is coming up on Thursday. Besides Halloween we also have our Fall Festival this Thursday. There is actually an older Christian tradition that regards October 31 as Reformation Day. Many of you have probably not heard of that designation, but there is a good story which lies behind it which has relevance to our study.

Religion had come to have a dominant place in German society in the early 1500s. But the church had strayed far from its biblical moorings and had become a corrupt institution. Pope Leo X (PROJECTOR ON--- LEO X) was seated on the throne of St. Peter in Rome as head of the Catholic Church. One of his chief concerns was a little building project that he had in the works. (ST PETER'S BASILICA) He was trying to finish the construction of St. Peter's Basilica. Coming up with the money to do that was proving to be a challenge.

One of his financing methods was the sale of indulgences. Pope Leo sent a Dominican priest by the name of Johann Tetzel (JOHANN TETZEL) to Germany to sell these indulgences. The indulgences which Tetzel sold to the Germans supposedly would cause deceased loved ones to spend less time in purgatory before they arrived in heaven. The saying attributed to Johann Tetzel, but probably used by others, was this: **“Sobald der Pfennig im Kasten klingt, die Seele aus dem Fegfeuer springt.”** In English this nicely translates as **“When a coin into the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.”** Money from the sale of these indulgences went to the building project in Rome and to the relief of the debt of a German prince who had recently bought the right to become a bishop.

There was this other German monk, whom you probably have heard about, who got pretty upset about this whole deal. He was Martin Luther. (MARTIN LUTHER) This indulgence deal did not pass the smell test with him. He had been teaching through the Book of Romans in the New Testament, and he was also questioning the Church's teaching on the human responsibility in salvation. He was beginning to recognize the New Testament's emphasis upon grace and faith. According to church tradition on October 31, 1517, he nailed a document expressing his concerns about the Roman church on the church door at Wittenburg Castle. (WITTENBURG DOOR)

This document became known as “The 95 Theses,” and the nailing of them to the church door is regarded by many historians as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Thus we get the name “Reformation Day.” The first of these 95 theses said this: **“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘repent,’ He willed that the entire life of believers be one of repentance.”**

In the evangelical church today terms like “love” and “self-esteem” and “addiction” and “acceptance” and “faith” are commonplace. But “repentance” does not seem to be mentioned very much. It is unfortunate, because repentance is a major theme of the Bible. (PROJECTOR OFF) When John the Baptist began his public ministry, his message was: **“Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** When Jesus began His public ministry, His message was: **“Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** When Peter finished the first sermon delivered after the establishment of the Christian church in Jerusalem at Pentecost, he declared, **“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...”** (Acts 2:38)

Repentance is essential to spiritual unity. Last week we looked at the sorry state of Joseph’s family. We saw how Joseph’s brothers were separated from each other. They had sold Joseph into slavery. Some had wanted to kill him. Joseph’s oldest brother Reuben had wanted to release him. But they all had managed to keep what really happened to Joseph secret from their father, telling him that Joseph had died. So there was separation between the brothers and their father. All of them had operated on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. Deceit and dishonesty resulted from that. So there was alienation from God.

But the Lord had a plan to use this fractured family to glorify Himself. In order to do that He had to establish unity. Unity had to be established within the family and with the Lord. We saw last week how the Lord was using circumstances and Joseph to bring this family together and to Himself. We also saw last week how important the New Testament says that unity is among Christians. Today we are going to see what part repentance had in this process of establishing unity in Joseph’s family--- and what part repentance has in establishing spiritual unity among God’s people today.

I.

In regard to the first 17 verses of #43 I would like for us to consider the subject of JOSEPH AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE RIGHTEOUS TO SEEK REPENTANCE FROM SINNERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. JOSEPH AND THE RESPONSIBILITY...) The term “repent” in the New Testament is used to translate the Greek word *metanoieo*, which literally means “to change one’s mind.” In the New Testament the changing of the mind has to do with sin. The basic meaning of “repent” in the New Testament is “to turn to God from sin.”

As a theological idea the term “repent” has been used in at least three different ways. **First**, it has been used by some in the sense of simply being sorry for one’s wrongdoing. There is a change of mind in regard to one’s actions. A person comes to the point of recognizing certain actions as morally wrong. This may or may not be accompanied by a change of behavior or by a turning to God.

In this first sense of the term we could find many people in jail who recognize that the crime for which they were convicted involved wrong behavior on their part. Some will

not recognize this. Those who do are sorry about what they did. But this does not necessarily mean that they have sought forgiveness from any person or from God. A change of mind about wrong behavior may not mean that there has been a change of behavior. Judas Iscariot was sorry about his wrongdoing. He went out and hanged himself because of it. But he was not seemingly willing to turn to God for forgiveness.

A **second** way in which “repent” is used is in the sense of turning to God or Jesus Christ in saving faith and turning away from sin. This is the way in which “repent” is used by Peter in his sermon in Acts #2 when he tells the Jews gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. He was calling upon the Jews to turn from their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and to trust Him as being the Messiah. Peter called upon them to recognize and believe that Jesus had died for their sins and risen from the dead. This is what made them, and makes us, true Christians.

A **third** way in which “repent” is used is in the sense of turning to God and/or other people for forgiveness of particular sins. This repentance involves not only a recognition that certain actions in the past have been wrong but also a seeking of forgiveness from the one, or ones, who have been offended.

The confrontation with sin in the Joseph story is framed in terms of this third meaning of “repent.” There is not a specific description given to us about the point at which the members of Joseph’s extended family turned to God in saving faith. The focus here is on how the family members come to deal with particular sins, especially the sin of selling Joseph as a slave.

In #42 we saw that the brothers had come to the point of recognizing that their selling of Joseph as a slave was wrong. According to v. 21 of #42 they said to one another, **“In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.”** This was repentance in the first sense of the term. They had come to recognize that what they did was wrong. This was a significant advance from their attitude twenty years earlier. Most of them at that time had shown no sense of guilt or remorse for what they had done.

But still we don’t see evidence that the brothers have turned to God for forgiveness for their sins. We also don’t see that they have confessed their sin to their father and sought his forgiveness. It seems that both Joseph and the Lord are pressing for this third kind of forgiveness. In order for spiritual unity to be established these family members need to come to the point of seeking forgiveness for their sins from the Lord, from Joseph, and from their father. It is for this kind of repentance that Joseph seems to strive in the first part of this chapter.

In #43 we saw that the brothers had returned to Egypt with Benjamin, Joseph’s only full-blooded brother, to buy more grain. Joseph had given a big banquet for all the brothers. He seated them from the oldest to the youngest, which astonished them, since they could not figure out how he would have known their ages and birth order. He had

especially honored his brother Benjamin who, with the apparent death of Joseph, had become the favorite son of Jacob.

Joseph honored Benjamin in this way because he wanted to test the attitude of his brothers. Was there still jealousy and hatred among them? Were they still distant from their father? As the chapter closes, Joseph watches as his brothers feast together, giving no indication that they are resentful toward, or jealous of, the special treatment given to Benjamin.

In our chapter Joseph initiates a final test. In the process he prods his brothers along the path toward a full and final repentance. As his brothers leave for home, he has his steward return their money to their sacks, and he has his special silver cup put in the sack of Benjamin. The brothers head for home, no doubt in a good mood. They have accomplished their mission. They have purchased the needed grain. They have gotten Simeon out of prison. They have returned with their father's favorite son.

But then Joseph sends his steward and his men after the brothers. The steward catches up to them and accuses them of having stolen Prime Minister Joseph's special cup. It is said to be used for divination. There was a custom widely practiced in the ancient world whereby important officials would have special cups that were used to determine future events. Water would be put in the cup. Then either some particles of gold and silver or a special oil would be put in the water. The resulting designs that were formed in the water were interpreted according to certain rules to figure out what was going to happen in the future.

Whether Joseph actually practiced divination by this method is not clear. I tend to doubt it. I suspect that he had such a cup because a person in his office was expected to have it. He simply used it here for purposes of his test. Deuteronomy #18 v. 10 indicates that this method of determining the future was later forbidden by the law given by God to Moses.

When the steward confronts the brothers, they are confident about their innocence. They vow that if any one of them is found to have the cup, he should die. The rest will become slaves. Isn't it ironic that years earlier Jacob had vowed to his father-in-law Laban that anyone found in possession of his family idols should die? Unknown to Jacob the idols were in the possession of his favorite wife Rachel. Now, unknown to the brothers, the divining cup is in the possession of Jacob's favorite son and Rachel's youngest son.

In our story the steward responds that all he wants is for the person with the cup to become his slave. The sacks are checked, and the cup is found in Benjamin's sack. The brothers are obviously upset. They tear their clothes, and they all return with the steward to see Joseph. The brothers, however, have truly changed. There is no indication now of an attempt to abandon Benjamin. There seems to be unity that is developing in this clan.

When Joseph confronts his brothers, it is Judah who responds in v. 16: **“What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord’s servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found.”** The brothers are innocent of the theft of Joseph’s cup. Yet they unite with Benjamin in his apparent guilt. As spokesman for his brothers Judah says that God has found out their guilt. What is their guilt if they had not stolen Joseph’s cup? It is their belief that God is punishing them for their sin of having sold Joseph into slavery twenty years earlier. They have not taken Joseph’s cup, but they are guilty of something far worse. Through the circumstances that Joseph has cleverly arranged, they sense that God is dealing with them and forcing them to confront their sin.

To live in unity and to have a positive testimony to a watching world this family must display a sacrificial love. So Joseph pushes them one step further. He tells the brothers that they can all go, except Benjamin. He will become a slave, but the rest can go free.

Joseph is probing deeply. He wants to know just what the commitment of these brothers is to their father. Is there going to be genuine unity in this family? The offer Joseph is making to his brothers has an obvious parallel to the situation twenty years earlier. The brothers have a chance to return home with the favorite son of their father. Will they take it?

Joseph understood the fractured state of his family. He realized the desperate need that these people had for unity--- for right relationships with brothers, for right relationships with the father, for right relationships with God. Joseph had heard their acknowledgment of wrongdoing. But he was testing them and pushing his brothers toward full repentance--- toward the acknowledgment of wrongdoing that seeks forgiveness from other people and from the Lord.

The Bible recognizes that we Christians have a certain responsibility to seek repentance from fellow sinners. In Matthew #18 vv. 15-17 (MATTHEW 18:15) Jesus told His followers, **““If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (MATTHEW 18:16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (MATTHEW 18:17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”**

In applying this teaching of Jesus there are two extremes which we need to avoid. On one hand we need to avoid applying this procedure to every slight error of omission or commission that a fellow Christians is perceived to commit against us or the Lord. Some things are best quickly forgiven and forgotten. On the other hand we need to avoid never applying this instruction at all. Blatant sins can be passed over and ignored to the detriment of the sinner and the community of Christians.

The Scriptures also recognize the responsibility that church leaders and mature Christian men and women have to seek repentance from sinners. In Galatians #6 v. 1 (GALATIANS 6:1) the Apostle Paul writes, **“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”** Examples mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament of such trespasses requiring action from spiritual Christians include sexual immorality and doctrinal heresy.

Christian parents have a special opportunity and responsibility to seek repentance from their children when the kids are involved in wrong behavior. We need to not only help them to acknowledge their wrongdoing but also to prod them to seek forgiveness from those who are offended, including the Lord. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In some situations it is not always possible to seek repentance from those who have sinned against us or others or the Lord. Some sinners are not Christians who accept our faith system. Some sinners either withdraw from contact with us or have no relationship with us in the first place. Some who have sinned against us are no longer in the land of the living.

It is very important for us to understand that the righteous always have a responsibility to forgive. Joseph had forgiven his brothers long before they came to him in Egypt. Spiritual unity, however, requires that sinners repent. Unity cannot be established or restored until those who have sinned against us or the Lord have sought forgiveness.

I told you several weeks ago about the church in the Midwest that forced me out as pastor early in my ministry experience. I have forgiven the couple who were primarily responsible for this treatment. If I was to bump into them somewhere some day, I would stick out my hand and say, “Hi, Steve. Hi, Joandelle. How are you doing?” I am not sure that they would respond in the same way.

I heard sometime after I left the church that this couple had admitted to others that they had done some things wrong in the way that they treated my family and me. That is an example of the first aspect of repentance. They were sorry about their wrongdoing. But they never sought forgiveness from me. So their repentance is not complete.

Sometime after I left this church, a friend of mine who had been in leadership and who had left the church because of what happened and had been supportive of us saw this Steve guy in a store. My friend also had a forgiving spirit. So he went over to greet Steve, but Steve quickly left the store. After my friend finished his business in the store, he saw Steve sitting in his truck. He went over toward Steve, but Steve drove to the far end of the parking lot. Restoration of unity with Steve was seemingly impossible because of his unwillingness to even talk to my friend.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the most touching stories in the Bible. As most of you remember, the younger son in the story acted selfishly toward his father. Although the father was not required to do it, he let his son take his share of the estate

and go off to live on his own. Jesus says that this son used up the money in wild living. Things got so bad for him that he decided to return home and throw himself on the mercy of his father.

Now the father had forgiven his son a long time before his return. He loved his son. But there was little that he could do to seek repentance from him except to pray for him. Unity in the family and unity with God was not possible until the son repented and returned home to seek his father's forgiveness.

So our responsibility as believers is always to forgive. If the opportunity is available, we should seek repentance from sinners. We need to follow biblical guidelines in doing that. We should not act in vindictiveness. We must also leave room for the Lord to work.

II.

Consider then in vv. 18-34 the subject of JUDAH AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SINNERS TO REPENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. JUDAH AND THE RESPONSIBILITY...) Judah takes the lead in acting as spokesman for his brothers. In this moving address he recounts the events which have taken place in the interaction of the brothers with the Egyptian ruler and with their father back in Canaan. He describes the hesitation of Jacob in agreeing to send Benjamin to Egypt. He explains the love of Jacob toward his youngest son. He tells of his own promise to guarantee the return of Benjamin upon the promise of his own life.

Finally, in vv. 33 & 34, Judah tells Joseph, **“Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. 34 For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father.”** Judah offers himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for his brother. He is willing to take the sin of his brother upon himself. He is willing to spend the rest of his life as a slave for the sake of his brother and his father.

Over twenty years earlier these brothers had acted against Joseph, the favorite son of their father. Jacob's feelings and wishes had been made secondary to their own selfishness and feelings of jealousy. Judah in that situation had taken on a leadership role. It was his idea that Joseph be sold as a slave. Judah and his brothers had then taken Joseph's special robe, dipped it in blood, and given it to their father. They lied, saying that they had discovered the robe and that apparently Joseph had been devoured by a wild beast.

In #38 we saw Judah fail to provide for his widowed daughter-in-law. He later had sexual relations with her, thinking that she was a temple prostitute. All of this was done with little evidence that Judah cared about whether he had sinned against a holy God.

But Judah has changed. With the help of Joseph and the providential hand of God, Judah and his brothers have been brought to the point of full repentance. Though Benjamin was innocent of the particular charge against him, his brothers stood with him. There was no abandonment, no passing of blame, no excuses, no deceit. There was

willingness by Judah to stand in the place of his little brother. There was willingness by all of the brothers to confront the wrongdoing they had committed against Joseph years earlier. These men are truly repentant. They are willing to seek forgiveness for their sins. Unity is about to be established in the family of Jacob. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Bible says that all of us are sinners. In Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost he preached that all people have an obligation to repent. All people have a responsibility to turn from their rejection of Jesus Christ to faith in Him as the Messiah. The content of this faith is the claim that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who became a human being. He lived a sinless life. He died on a cross to bear the penalty for the sins of the world. On the third day He rose from the dead. When any individual comes to repent in this way, to turn from sin to faith in Jesus Christ, he or she will receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

Beyond this the Bible says that all Christians have a responsibility to repent of individual sins. We need to first recognize that something we have done or said is contrary to God's righteous standards. We then need to seek forgiveness from God.

If other individuals have been directly affected by our sin, we need to seek their forgiveness as well. This is hard work. I don't like to do it. I want to always be right. But you and I are sinners, and we need to repent of our sins. As we have seen from the story of Joseph, this is necessary to preserve spiritual unity.

If there is sin in your life that is affecting your relationship with God, with your family, or with the community of fellow Christians, determine to repent of it right now. Our sin is seldom, if ever, committed in a vacuum. It affects the spiritual unity of the whole community.

A theologian by the name of John Neuhaus says, **"The Christian needs the church to be a repenting community. The Christian needs the church to be a zone of truth in a world of mendacity [i.e. deception], to be a community in which our sin need not be disguised, but can be honestly faced and plainly confessed because we know that the worst word about us as sinners is not the last word. The last word is about us as sinners forgiven."** The basis for a right relationship with God and with each other is forgiveness that comes from a gracious God.