

Genesis 50:15-21

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When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

"To err is human; to forgive, divine." That's how the saying goes, and I'm sure you've all heard it before. The idea is that nobody is perfect, we all make mistakes. That's natural. What's unnatural is *forgiving* those mistakes and moving on! And so, I've seen a few times a *different* take on that well-known saying: "To err is human; to forgive is against company policy." And that probably better describes how we often react when we're wronged.

We discussed a month or so ago how some of the most difficult words to say are, "I was wrong. I'm sorry." Much *easier* to say is "I forgive you." That's something that we almost just rattle off without even thinking about it when someone apologizes to us for some wrong. But *real* forgiveness involves much more than just mouthing the words, "I forgive you." Real forgiveness also involves corresponding action. And *that* type of forgiveness is very difficult, indeed.

Forgiveness is the subject of today's sermon. For, as Christians coming to the Lord for forgiveness today, we want to be assured that we have it. We also want to extend that hand of forgiveness to our fellow man. So, our text for this morning will help us to review:

The Policy of Forgiveness

I've always thought that our text today contains one of the most beautiful examples of forgiveness in all of history: Joseph forgiving his brothers. Let's review the situation that led up to our text.

Joseph, a young man at the time, just 17-years-old, had become the subject of hatred among his eleven brothers. He had this annoying habit of tattling on them. On top of that, he was the favorite son of their father Jacob, a fact which perhaps understandably does not sit well with the rest of the boys. To top it all off, Joseph is a dreamer. He dreams that one day his father and mother and brothers will all bow down to him. He tells them the dream, and they don't like it one bit.

Hatred sets in. This hatred becomes so intense that a plan is contrived for his murder. They see an opportunity, and they hatch a plan to drop him into an empty pit and leave him there to die. Thankfully, cooler heads prevail, and instead of killing him, the brothers merely sell Joseph into slavery to a caravan headed to Egypt. They sell him for twenty pieces of silver. Through the course of events, he winds up in Egypt serving in the house of a rich man named Potiphar. But then, *more* trouble. Joseph is forced to flee from the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife, and because she lies

about the interaction, Joseph is thrown into prison. There he languishes—a forgotten man, without family or friends. Imagine the years of suffering he experienced in that Egyptian prison, and the reason he is there is because his brothers were jealous!

But God intervenes! Through a strange sequence of events, he was given the wisdom and the opportunity to interpret several of the Pharaoh's dreams. He predicts seven years of plenty followed by another seven years of famine. For this, he is promoted to second-in-command in all of Egypt. A remarkable turn of events! And here is where our story gets especially interesting. Joseph's brothers are suffering from the same famine. They learn that there's food in Egypt, and they journey down there to buy bread from Joseph, although they don't recognize him. They make several trips doing the same, and finally Joseph reveals to them his true identity.

What a moment for Joseph! How the tables had turned! Formerly, he was at the mercy of his cruel brothers, now *Joseph* had the upper hand! He could sit there with all the authority and think about the *years* of forced separation from his home and his family. He could ponder the months spent in prison and all the awful things he had encountered—all because these brothers had betrayed him. Is it any wonder that after their father had died, the brothers were afraid of what Joseph would do? ***“It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.”*** They only have one course of action, to plead for Joseph's mercy and forgiveness. So, they take this last desperate chance. First, they send messengers ahead of them, and then they appear in person, saying, ***“Please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father. . . Behold, we are your servants.”***

Would Joseph be able to do that? Could he *truly* put the past behind him and actually *forgive* them? Or, would he do the sensible thing and seize the moment and get his revenge?

You've heard of Julius Caesar, I'm sure. He was the great military commander who rose to rule over Rome about 50 years before Christ. When he was younger, however, he had been captured at sea by pirates. And for 38 days he was held captive, yet he became a source of amusement for the pirates. He taught them, played games with them, read to them, wrote poetry for them, and ordered them around. The pirates thought his arrogance was comical, so much so that when he vowed to crucify them after he was freed, they thought he was joking. But, after he was released for ransom, he tracked the pirates down and had them crucified. But in order to show leniency to the pirates who had generally treated him well, he had their throats slashed before crucifying them. To Julius Caesar, that was mercy.

Well, what about Joseph? His brothers' form of mercy was selling him into slavery instead of killing him. Would Joseph do something similar? The moment was ripe for Joseph to get some long-coming revenge. He could have stared his brothers in the face and gloated. He could have laughed with disdain. He could have said, “You didn't care about me, why should I care if your children starve to death!” But listen to what he actually said: ***“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.”*** And note the concluding remark, ***“Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”*** Joseph responded with forgiveness of the highest order! Not just with words, but with action!

And you and I have received just that kind of forgiveness. Because, our situation is very similar to that of Joseph's wicked brothers. We have been unbelievably faithless to our God. We've betrayed Him. By nature, we have hated Him. We've disobeyed His will, even intentionally. We've used His name carelessly. We've been ungrateful, unfaithful, untrusting. We took part in all the guilt that sent Jesus to suffer and die. And yet here we are, standing before God today. What can we do? We know what we deserve! The only option we have is to continue in the shoes of Joseph's brothers, to plead for mercy and forgiveness. To fall to our knees and cry out, **"Behold, we are your servants!"**

Is God really able to do that? Can He really turn His back on all our wrongs, or will He turn His back on us? Will God repay our evil with evil of His own? Or can He put our sin and guilt out of sight? He can do it, and He *has* done it! Listen to the words of Isaiah, **"You have cast all my sins behind your back."** (Isaiah 38:17) Or listen to the words of Micah, **"He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."** (Micah 7:19) Or listen to King David, **"As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."** (Psalm 103:12)

God declares to you in so many ways that you *are* forgiven. And God's forgiveness is the *true* kind. It's more than just words. He acted it out, thoroughly. On the dusty streets of Jerusalem, our Lord Jesus exercised His forgiveness toward us. He carried it to the extreme limit and suffered torture, death, and the sorrows of hell itself in order to forgive us. All this was done so that Isaiah could write, **"He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."** (Isaiah 53:5)

Joseph's brothers expected revenge. They received mercy. They waited for retribution. He extended the hand of reconciliation. Why? How could Joseph, who suffered *so much* because of His brothers—how could he forgive them with more than just words? How could he be so moved with loving compassion that he wept over them?

It's because of what he said: **"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."** Joseph saw that even in that horrible betrayal by his brothers, it was the Lord's mercy that had prevailed. The Lord had not forsaken him, and the Lord had continued to bless him. And he *also* knew that the Lord's mercy went much further than just taking care of his life in Egypt. You see, before Joseph had been sent abroad in chains, he had learned of God's promises. He'd learned about another betrayal, done by Adam and Eve, that rent mankind away from God. He'd also heard and believed, the promise that God had given them, that He would send one who would crush Satan's head and bring peace between man and God. He'd heard how that promise was re-affirmed to Abraham, to Isaac, and to his father Jacob.

And so, Joseph believed. He believed that in the end, God would have the final say. And he knew that God's final say for him was that all of his sins had been forgiven. A man far from home now, he knew that his real home awaited him in heaven. So, Joseph forgave likewise. Because how could he be forgiven so much and not be willing to forgive his brothers.

Brothers and sisters-in-Christ, forgiveness does not flow from arrogant, pride-filled hearts, but from hearts smitten by the tragedy of our sins, and melted by the beauty of God's grace. To be a genuine

forgiver, you have to have tasted the sweetness of forgiveness yourself. And you and I know what it's like to be forgiven. My prayer is that God would move our hearts to be like Joseph, to forgive also those who sin against us. They're out there, the people that need our forgiveness. Whether they know it or not, whether they want it or not! God has given each of us opportunities to forgive. Forgiven we are—forgiving may we be!

You know, there's an old adage about revenge, "Revenge is a dish best served cold." To us Christians, however, it is a dish best not served at all. In fact, it is forbidden to us. After all, ***"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*** (Romans 12:19) It's not easy for us to forgive the nasty lie, the hurtful remark, the words that hurt our reputation. No, our inclination is to fight back. But God, who forgives even the most unforgivable of our sins, also gives us the power to forgive those who sin against us.

So, the saying goes, "To err is human; to forgive, divine." And it might be more accurate in our experience when they say, "To err is human; to forgive is against company policy." Well, finding strength in the forgiveness Jesus offers and given the help of the Holy Spirit, "To forgive" can and will indeed be *our* policy. Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.