

Joseph: Learning to forgive Genesis 50:15-25, Matthew 18 21-35

Portions adapted from: "How to Receive an Apology," by Wayne Field & "God meant it for Good," by Jeff Strite; @ SermonCentral.Com

One year ago this month, on a Wednesday evening (June 17th 2015), a young man walked into the Emmanuel AME Church of Charleston SC, sat down for an hour with the weekly Bible study and at the end of the time he stood up and shot 10 of the participants (killing 9 of them). At his arrest, Dylan Roof told police that he was hoping to start a race war. But instead, one week later at his Bond hearing, as per South Carolina Law, family members were allowed to personally address Dylan. And shockingly, while newspaper columnists as far away as New York spoke of their inability to forgive such a horrific hate filled crime, the family members spoke of their pain and loss, but they also said they forgave him for what he had done to them.

*"I forgive you," said Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance,
"You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."*

"I acknowledge that I am very angry," said the sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor. "But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family ... is she taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."

How could these Christians find it in their heart to forgive such a horrible crime against their families? Now, one year later, these families are still struggling, but according to a recent [Christianity Today](#) article, their forgiving spirit holds.

We hear a lot in church about our need to seek forgiveness, and how to accept forgiveness. But today's lesson from the life of Joseph calls for us to think about how we must also give forgiveness. How can we truly learn to forgive another for the petty or perhaps the horrible crimes they have committed against us?

In today's Gospel portion we heard Jesus tell a parable with a very pointed lesson: we should graciously forgive others when we realize how much God has forgiven us. But then Jesus also added to his teaching a dire warning that failing to learn this lesson puts us in very real danger of not receiving God's forgiveness for ourselves; this parable was based on a real truth.

That's a scary thought. We have long been taught, in church, that forgiveness is offered to us freely by God's grace, but at the same time Jesus gave this warning about the ability of our un-forgiveness to negate God's forgiveness.

He even reinforced this teaching, when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray – a prayer that we now repeat every Sunday. After giving them words to say, Jesus then emphasized that part of the prayer that again put a conditionality of God’s own forgiveness.

... and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ... [Jesus then said] For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:12-15)

There you have it, Christians are expected – commanded – to be as forgiving of others as they have been forgiven by God. But how do we learn to give such forgiveness? Joseph’s experience can teach us some very helpful lessons about that.

The basic answer is that Christians – those who have come to God and by faith have received His forgiveness and offer of rebirth through the work of Jesus His son – we are supposed to be a changed people; a people now empowered, commanded, to return good for evil. And the more that we get to know God the more we should reflect his gracious forgiveness towards others; especially to those who have personally hurt us.

Think about you’d feel if someone did to you what Joseph’s brothers did to him, or if another Dylan Roof did to your family what he did to those Charleston Christians last year.

Several years ago Time magazine published a survey where people were asked if they would forgive someone who:

	% forgive	% not forgive
Told lies about them	73	24
Stole money from them	67	31
Slapped or punched them	64	32
Held them up with a gun	42	54
Murdered someone in community	33	59
Raped them	22	73
Raped a family member	19	77

(Time 4/5/99 p 58 Yankelovich Partners Inc Survey)

Those are terrible things to experience

And the worse the sin... the harder it was for people to say that they would forgive.

But Joseph’s brothers treated him was as bad – or worse – than anything on that list

- They robbed him of a precious possession – the cloak his father gave him.
- Deprived him of his home and family

- They had first intended to murder him, but ended up throwing him into a pit intending to let him die of thirst and abandonment.
- then instead they took further profit from his loss selling him into a slavery that could have been worse than death
- and then they broke his father's heart by lying about Joseph's his death.

What these brothers had done was unforgivable... but Joseph forgave them anyway
How could he do that?

Joseph could forgive his hateful brothers because

1. he trusted that God was in complete control of his life (*in bad times as well as good*).
2. he knew that all judgment, and forgiveness was up to God, not himself.
3. he really did love his brothers

Let's look into each one of the points.....

1st – Joseph had a forgiving spirit because he trusted that God was in complete control of his life.

20 years had passed since his brothers had gotten rid of Joseph, yet their conscience still burned within them. They have gone down to Egypt for grain, but calamity has befallen them as Pharaoh's official (Joseph in disguise) accuses them of being spies.

They said to one another, 'Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us.' Then Reuben answered them, 'Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.' Genesis 42:21-22

So years later these brothers continue to wear the guilt of their sin against their brother – part of what Joseph may have been trying to determine with this test he was putting them through. But even during the test Joseph had to turn away to hide the tears he was weeping at the sight of them, and perhaps the guilt they wore, or the pain they had caused their father Jacob.

Yet by this time Joseph had already forgiven their sin against himself for God had shown him that even their evil actions had been part of God's plan for now saving the entire family. Thus, at their return trip, when his heart would no longer allow him to conceal himself,

Then Joseph said to his brothers, '... 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. Genesis 45:4-5

This is the secret of Joseph's ability to forgive his brothers. He looked back over his life and realized that whatever had been done to him, God had allowed it to happen for a purpose.

- God had allowed him to be sold into slavery because He had a plan for Joseph to rescue Egypt along with his own entire household from famine.
- God allowed the injustice of him being wrongly accused by Potiphar's wife because He had a plan for Joseph meet with the cupbearer in prison.
- And God had even allowed the restored cupbearer to forget about Joseph and leave him a while longer in prison because God had a plan for the cupbearer, at just the right time to remember and introduce Joseph to Pharaoh.

Somehow Joseph knew – from his dreams – the reality of God's care and protection over every moment of his life; as God would later tell the nation of Israel.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

And just as He did for Joseph, and for Israel, God also has plans for you and me; plans for our welfare, plans that should give us hope for our future.

Those who do not believe God has a plan for each of us, might look at these incidents as isolated events. But Joseph could look back and can clearly discern the perfect will of God in his life, all these were no longer incidents that just happened by chance, but they were all related and interconnected following the perfect will and plan of God.

Thus knowing that his entire life, all the bad as well as the good, was ultimately in God's hands gave him the ability to forgive others their part they might have played in sinning against him. In prison or in slavery, he did not bear any grudge against those who had wronged him because he knew these injustices and misfortunes could only happen under the will of God; a will that he may not have understood right then but he would understand one day.

And Joseph's forgiveness probably also extended to outside the family – because that is the kind of Godly person he had become; we do not hear Joseph paying back Potiphar's wife, or Potiphar, or the cupbearer for forgetting him in prison. The argument from silence may not be convincing but it is consistent with Joseph's character.

Joseph could forgive any wrong done against him because he knew God had ultimate control over his life. But Joseph could also forgive, **because he knew that all judgment, and forgiveness was up to God, not himself.**

Now some 37 years after they threw him down a well, Joseph's brothers have lived under his gracious care for 20 years. But Jacob has died, and they are still afraid that Joseph will seek revenge against them. They assume that Joseph has only being kind to them up until this point for their father's sake, but now that Jacob is gone and Joseph is completely free to make them pay for their crimes.

Why are they so afraid of Joseph? Because this is what they would be doing if they were in his place. Though claiming to be “servants of God” they still did not know the God of Jacob.

And so they concoct a 3-part mercy plea which only shows how little they knew of true forgiveness.

1. They begin with a lie. About Jacob is asking Joseph to forgive (*surely Jacob and Joseph already had this conversation in the past and Joseph had assured his father of his full forgiveness ... so now Joseph knew they were lying*).
2. Then they wanted to claim the protection of Jacobs God – calling themselves “the servants of the God of Jacob.”
3. And lastly they threw themselves completely on his mercy: *we are here as your slaves* (50:18)

And how did Joseph respond?

As he always did when he saw his brothers struggling with sin, Joseph wept.

And then he said the most amazing thing.

Hear it again and think for a moment about what Joseph said when he replied to his brothers, *Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God?*

(--- pause ----)

Am I in the place of God? That is a rhetorical question not a statement -- Joseph wanted them to realize the answer for themselves.

Since even the harm they intended for him – as he had already assured them -- was part of God’s larger plan for saving many people, Joseph had already completely forgiven them for himself ... *forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sinned against us*.

But they needed to know that their sin against him was even more a sin against God (as he had earlier told Potipher’s wife – *how could I do this great wickedness and sin against God* (39:10). They, like Potipher’s wife, still had to answer to God for their actions; they needed God’s forgiveness, not Joseph’s.

This is what Jesus meant that for his followers, as God’s salt and light in this world, needing to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, and when a coat is demanded offer our shirt as well. Way back then, Joseph already knew what Paul would later write to new Christians:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ... never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. Romans 12:17-19

"Am I in the place of God?" In other words to repay evil for evil is to live in the old life. Joseph understood that as a follower of God, judgment is God's territory, not ours.

In 1981 there was an attempt on the life of Pope John Paul. Fortunately, the Pope lived. After he recovered, he shocked the world when he made a visit to Prison to meet with Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who only two years before had tried to assassinate him. The Pope and terrorist huddled in Agca's cell for 20 minutes, talking in low voices that could not be heard. When he emerged John Paul explained, "I spoke to a brother whom I have pardoned."

When they first came down to Egypt, Joseph told his brothers that he forgave them ... but they had never asked God's forgiveness for themselves.

Adam Clarke once observed: "The conscience records (our sins); and - by giving birth to continual fears and doubtfulness - destroys all peace of mind, security, and confidence"

Until a person comes to the point where they are willing to confess and accept forgiveness they'll tend to run away from that which would give them peace of mind. Joseph's brothers had been running for 37 years. We can only hope that they eventually found for themselves the forgiveness that Joseph had long ago given.

Joseph could forgive his brothers their crimes against himself, because he knew his life had always been in God's hands and he knew that his brothers had sinned not so much against him as against God. But also **Joseph could forgive them because he really did love his brothers**

Notice that every time he saw his brothers, in their need or caught in their own deceptions, What did Joseph do?

he wept over them.

These brothers had done him great harm, but still he loved them. They were family. If you don't love someone... you're not likely to forgive them, but you love them, you can find a way to forgive. That is why Peter instructs us: *Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins* (1Peter 4:8). And he should know, himself having been forgiven much both by Jesus and his fellow Apostles.

And is not this how God has always dealt with us?

"For God so LOVED the world, that He gave His one and only son, that whosoever would believe in Him might not perish but have everlasting life." John 3:16

Have you ever wondered how God could forgive you?

He forgave you because He loved you.

He's always loved you.

And because He's loved you, it's easy for Him to forgive you... no matter what you've done.

And because God loved us so much that He could forgive US our sins He commands us to do the same thing to others

In Ephesians, The Apostle Paul, who himself had to grow a forgiving spirit, writes:

"Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." Ephesians 4:31-32

God says love each other - and forgive each other - BECAUSE I DID IT FOR YOU!
Period.

Now all that is left for us to do is apply this lesson to ourselves.

Stop for a moment and think of that person(s) that you have not been able to forgive. Perhaps it was something petty, perhaps it was a horrendous crime against you.

Name them to yourself : _____

And ask yourself

- Has God worked things out for good in your life?
- Will they not be answering to God for what they have done?
- Can you find it in your heart to love them as much as God loves them, as much as God loves you in spite of what you have done?

And then ask yourself: Am I trying to be in the place of God?

Then forgive them and free yourself from your enslavement to the anger and hatred that no longer has a place in your life in Christ.

In a few moments we are going to come to the communion table to remember, rejoice and celebrate again God's forgiveness that has given us new life. So hear again what Jesus said:

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

That sounds like some real good advice for where we are at right now.

So before we come to the table, why don't we do some praying, and some forgiving.