

Strength to Forgive

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

If you were to ask most people to mention one of the best qualities of the Christian faith (you might hear someone tell you that “Christians are taught to forgive”)...

In fact, we know that Jesus said words of forgiveness for his murderers (in his final moments on the cross – crying out, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*”) - and there are numerous passages in our Bible that remind us that *just as God has forgiven us* (so, too, should we forgive)... Mark 11:25 and Colossians 3:13 are two very good examples of this theology...

I should also point out that according to my NIV Bible Concordance – the word ‘*forgive*’ is mentioned 74 times in the Bible – ‘*forgiven*’ shows up 46 times – and the word ‘*forgiveness*’ can be found an additional 14 times... obviously forgiveness has an important place in our lives as Christians...

But here’s the issue that I have grappled with through the years – and perhaps you have too > the Bible mentions that we should forgive but it doesn’t tell us *how to forgive*...

You know, this week, as I was preparing my message on the topic of forgiveness I stumbled upon the story of a young woman who was remembering a troubled teen in her neighborhood (who happened to be a casual friend of her brother)... evidently this young man had trouble at home (and whenever she and her mother would see him before school her mother would always say, “*Be kind to him because he’s most likely suffering*”)...

Well, to keep a long story short the young man broke into their house one night (and surprised to see anyone home – he pulled out a gun and shot both her brother and her mother in cold blood)... when asked why he did it (the 17 year old young man said, “*because she (the mother) wouldn’t stop screaming*” ...

Imagine the struggle of trying to forgive...

And as this young woman tells the story of her own journey of forgiveness (which she describes as the most difficult thing she has ever done) she says, “*If you choose to forgive it won’t make you a good person... it won’t save you... it may not be understood by family and friends... and it certainly won’t be easy... and I suppose the question is why do it at all?*” ... but then she paused for a moment – as she remembered the unbelievable pain that one man brought into her life – and as if

she was still fighting to hold onto the belief herself, she said, “*We forgive - because it’s the only thing that sets us free*”...

You know, our first reading this morning (from Genesis 45) is really a story about forgiveness (with all of the twists and the turns of a soap opera – and all the wonder that only biblical heroes can leave you with)...

And if you don’t know the story of Joseph’s life (in order for you to better understand this passage) let me simply tell you that Joseph was the son of Jacob and Rachel (and he had 11 brothers and 1 sister)... and the way that the story is told – Joseph’s parents seem to favor him the most... in fact, his father Jacob (also known as ‘Israel’) gives him a multi-colored robe (which only continues to make his brothers increasingly jealous)...

Well, to keep a long story short – Joseph begins to have dreams from God that only he can interpret... in one dream he envisions his brothers bowing down to his grain harvest – and in another dream he envisions the moon, the sun, and the stars bowing down to him (which he interprets to mean that the whole family will bow down to him)... this obviously pushes the brothers over the edge and they plot to kill him one day (while he’s out in the field feeding the flock)... and when they see him the Bible tells us that they all jump on him, strip him of his multi-colored robe, throw him into a hole in the ground – and then eventually sell him to Ishmaelite slave traders (where he ends up in Egypt)...

Life in Egypt is very difficult at first... Joseph is forced to work as a house slave (he’s falsely accused of rape by his owner’s frisky wife) ends up in prison (and misses his father greatly – who his brothers lie to and say that Joseph was killed by wild animals)... needless to say, Joseph had many reasons to be angry, and hurt, and would be justified in seeking revenge...

Yet, what’s amazing about Joseph’s life is not only that he continues to dream (which gets the attention of the Pharaoh – who takes a liking to Joseph after he helps the king prepare for a severe famine in the land) – and in unbelievable fashion his gift of dream interpretation helps to promote him through the ranks of the royal palace (so that by the time he sees his brothers again – who come to Egypt in search of food – he has become so powerful in that country that they don’t even recognize him)...

And that's where our passage from Genesis 45 begins... Joseph had every tool at his disposal to exact revenge on his brothers – and instead – Joseph chooses to forgive...

Now the Bible doesn't tell us how Joseph learned to be so forgiving – in fact, there aren't any 'steps' mentioned... no, special prayers listed... there aren't any suggestions, or checklists to follow... but even though the Bible doesn't tell us 'how' to forgive... what it does tell us about (are the lives of God's faithful people – who like Joseph – trusted not in himself to exact revenge on his brothers (but trusted rather in the Lord to see Him through)... and when he did that Joseph noticed that even the things that were done against him (became for Joseph blessings in disguise) that opened door after door...

In fact, listen to what he says in Genesis 50:20 as reason for his own belief in forgiveness... he says to those who violated him *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."*...

Friends, I can't tell you that forgiving someone is easy – instead, I think it's just the opposite – I think that forgiving someone who has hurt you is very hard – and a long process of healing – but I do believe that it's the only thing that can set you free (from the bitterness, and the anger, and the sleepless nights, and the interruptions to your life, and the drama that never does anyone any good)

And if you want that for your own life (Joseph shows us - that only with the help of God – can we have it)... but the good news is – we can... peace is offered to all of us (who choose to trust in the way of Lord) especially when it's not easy...

Let me close with something I believe comes from Native American folklore (that might help you remember this message this morning)... in fact, do you remember that story about the little boy who noticed his grandfather sitting under the tree?... and he says, "Grandpa, what are you doing?"...

The grandfather opens his eyes and looks up at the boy (and says, "I am watching two wolves inside of me at war... the first wolf is anger, and bitter, and hatred, and revenge – and he's very hungry...

The other wolf is forgiveness, and peace, and a calm mind – and he's also hungry"...

With that, the little boy says, "And which wolf will win?"...

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The old man says, "It depends on which one I feed"...

I can't tell you how to forgive – nor would I ever wag my ginger at you if you struggled to do so - (but what I can tell you is what we learn from Joseph's story – is that when you choose to keep the Lord at the center of your life (even that which was meant to harm you – can be one more reason to bless the name of God)...

May the peace of Jesus Christ fill your broken heart and heal your wounds... may His love guide your steps and be spoken through your words... and may God's name be blessed throughout the world...

In Jesus' name we pray...

Amen!