

August 11, 2024  
Genesis 50:15-21

What do you think is the hardest teaching of the Bible? If you were to tell someone you know about the Bible, what do you think would be the teaching that makes them say, “There’s no way you actually believe that! That’s wrong!” C.S. Lewis, the famous Christian writer, in his book, “Mere Christianity,” writes: *“I said in a previous chapter that chastity was the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. But I am not sure I was right. I believe the one I have to talk of today is even more unpopular: the Christian rule, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Because in Christian morals “thy neighbor” includes “thy enemy,” and so we come up against this terrible duty of forgiving our enemies. Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive... It is not that people think this too high and difficult a virtue: it is that they think it hateful and contemptible.”* I think he’s right. There are many things the Bible teaches that contradict our culture, but forgiveness may be the most enraging. Because it’s one thing to say, “forgiveness is good,” it’s another to forgive your spouse when they hurt you, your parents when they neglected you, your children when they dishonored you, your friends when they betrayed your trust, your boss when he makes your life hard, the bullies who think they are so much better than you- you have to forgive them, and it’s not optional- look at what Jesus says! Some of his harshest words are directed at those who don’t forgive- if you don’t forgive, you will not be forgiven by God. It’s that serious.

Today, we see forgiveness on display in the life of Joseph and his brothers. After reading this text, you may have some questions: why are they afraid of Joseph, what was the evil that they did to him? If you remember talking about Abraham a few weeks back, you remember that God chose him to be the one from whom his people would come. So Abraham had a son, Isaac, and Isaac had a son, Jacob, and Jacob had 12 sons, and those 12 sons would become the 12 tribes of Israel, like Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Levi, and so on. Joseph was his eleventh son, and his favorite, and he made it as obvious as possible, giving Joseph this beautiful, expensive coat as a sign of his love, and Joseph would have dreams where the sun and moon and eleven stars bowed down to him and he rubbed it in his brothers’ face, saying, “you’re all going to bow down to me.” So, his brothers decide to kill him. While they are out tending their flocks, Joseph comes to spy on them for his dad, and they grab him and throw him into an empty water cistern, and while he screams and cries for mercy, they laugh. Hearing him cry gave them joy. And then some traveling merchants pass by on the way to Egypt and his brothers figure, “if we just kill him, we’ll get nothing for him. Let’s sell him into slavery.” So they did, and they took his beautiful coat, dipped it in goat’s blood, and showed it to his father and said, “isn’t this your son’s coat?” And they saw their father cry out and pull his hair out of his scalp in grief, and felt no remorse. While Joseph was in Egypt, God blessed him, and it worked out that Joseph was put into a leadership position over Ancient Egypt and through his God-given wisdom saved Egypt from this terrible famine that would have killed millions of people, and his own brothers eventually come to Egypt because they hear Egypt has food, and they show up before him, they don’t

recognize him, but he recognized them, and he immediately goes into the other room and breaks in tears. Eventually, he reveals himself, the brothers reconcile, and Jacobs sees his son, and dies a happy man. But now, the brothers are afraid. Joseph is second in command of the most powerful nation in the world at that time, and he's had to wait years to take his revenge for the trauma and pain they caused him. He has every right and every chance to crush them like they crushed him. Of course they're scared. So they try to put Joseph in a position where he has to forgive them by fabricating this request from Jacob that Joseph would forgive the evil of his brothers and not pay them back, and Joseph weeps, probably because he knows it's a lie and he's hurt that his brothers feel like they need to do this, but they throw themselves down at his feet. And Joseph forgives them. He speaks kindly to them. He promises to use his wealth to take care of them and their children. It's a touching moment of reconciliation, and a deeply relatable true story that teaches two things about forgiveness: 1. What forgiveness is, and 2. How we can do it.

1. What is Forgiveness? I'll be the first to admit that I've often given fake forgiveness. Fake forgiveness is when you say, "I forgive you," but you don't really mean it, and really, you still hate that person and try to, in your own way, get them back. That's actually what the brothers are afraid of- the word for "hold a grudge" literally means to hope for something bad to happen to that person, and then rejoice when it does- so if you say, "I forgive you," but then something bad happens and you think, "Yes! Serves you right!" You didn't really forgive them. And if you say, "I forgive you," but you attempt to pay them back, get even, either by blowing up at them, hurting them, doing the same thing to them, going behind their back and ruining their reputation, all in an attempt to make them feel the way they made you feel, that's not forgiveness, that's revenge. Forgiveness also isn't saying, "don't worry, it's fine." Joseph clearly says that what they did, they meant for evil. Forgiveness isn't just wishing away and forgetting what happened. Forgiveness is exactly what the original word is in Hebrew: literally, "to carry" or "to bear" someone's guilt. When someone sins against you, there's an inequality, an injustice, and the natural response is to give yourself justice. Forgiveness, therefore, is bearing their guilt. It's absorbing the blow. It's saying, "What you did was wrong, but I'm not going to pay it back. I'm not going to make you feel bad for it, especially if you already do, I'm not going to shove this in your face. I'm going to let it go because I love you, even if this hurts." That's really what forgiveness is. It's voluntary suffering for the ones you love and absorbing the pain they caused instead of giving it back to them. And that's exactly what Joseph does- he absorbs the pain, the trauma, even though his brothers are still deeply flawed men, he treats them well, comforts them, and loves them, even though they do not deserve it. Anyone who's ever had to do this for their spouse, their child, their parent, their friend, their enemy, so all of us, know exactly how difficult it is. How can Joseph do something so painful, and yet so liberating? How can we?

2. How you can forgive. Look at what Joseph says. "Am I in the place of God?" Firstly, Joseph understands that to hold a grudge isn't just petty, it's blasphemy. God is the ultimate judge of all people. He is the one who decides who's guilty and not guilty, and so if Joseph were to decide to

take his revenge, he'd be doing something that only God has the right to do. He also is well aware of how greatly and how often God has had to forgive him. Remember when I told you about Joseph and his brothers, and how Joseph was the favorite and everyone knew it? He knew it, too. And he shoved it in his brothers' faces. He was an arrogant, insufferable, spoiled brat- just as sinful, selfish, and depraved as any of his brothers, and the last person to withhold forgiveness from them- if God could forgive him, then he could certainly forgive others. Joseph understood a hard truth- you can't forgive people that you think you're better than. In order to truly forgive, you must understand that you are just as sinful, and equally in need of forgiveness as they are. How can you know what Joseph knew? From this dysfunctional, petty, murderous family came a dysfunctional, petty, rebellious nation called Israel, and from that nation Jesus was born to fulfill God's ultimate plan- to forgive all of us for the times that we've spat in his face. Because God is a God of perfect justice, and anyone who sins against him has to receive justice and God sent his son to absorb our punishment so we wouldn't have to. The Cross of Jesus and his suffering wasn't just a display of love, it was out punishment, and you could be forgiven by a holy God. There's a reason we constantly talk about the Cross- it's the central message of the Bible, and the forgiveness that Jesus offers us is the most unique, beautiful, profound thing we could ever dare hope for. It's what Christianity is about: that is why Christians *must forgive*. We don't forgive in order to be forgiven by Jesus. But because Jesus forgave us even before we were born, before we sinned, before we even wanted his forgiveness, and because the horrible things we've done to him, the ways we've spat in his face have all been completely forgiven, and no one has ever sinned against us as much as we've sinned against him, it's our joy to share the beautiful, painful, yet beautiful, liberating gift of forgiveness with others. When you understand just how greatly you have had to be forgiven, you tend to be open to forgiving others. Our forgiveness is a fruit of Jesus' forgiveness.

One final point I'd like to make. Out of curiosity, I google-searched "benefits of forgiveness," and what I found was interesting. Listed among the benefits were, "improved relationships, lower blood pressure, higher self-esteem, better mental health," and other health benefits. Now, that's great, but if you are forgiving someone for your own sake, that's not really love, nor is it really forgiveness. At best, it's just not caring. Biblical forgiveness, Joseph forgiveness, Jesus forgiveness, forgiveness that truly heals you and your relationships must be because you love that person more than yourself, and it's often granted before it's felt. Real, unselfish, love-motivated forgiveness is incredibly hard, and is something that all Christians struggle to do well. It also happens to be one of, if not the most, tender, heart-melting, loudest, most compelling proofs that the Gospel is true. In a culture where everything, even forgiveness, is about me, me, and me, and everything I do I do for me, even the things I do for you, I do for me, how beautifully strange would you look to your co-workers, friends, and family if you chose to treat your bullies with kindness and grace, to overlook the offenses, to forgive even before they apologize, and even forgive those with whom reconciliation is impossible- because of abuse and toxicity- sometimes that happens and separation is necessary, but you can still forgive, and pray

for that person. How shocking do you think that would be to people to see you do that? Anyone can give a lot to church, or make a meal for the homeless, or be in Bible Study (all of which are very good things that you should do!). But to forgive and love your enemies, and even harder, your loved ones, those who hurt you, that's special. And if someone asks, which someone will, "how? How can you do that?" Boldly proclaim: "I'm not in the place of God! In fact, he took the place of me, and every sinner, and forgave me of everything even when I didn't deserve it. Now I get to do the same." Amen.