

Sermon for October 5, 2014 – 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 50:15-21 (NIV84)

Theme: **“I forgive you.”**

- 1) *A blessing for the one who hears it*
- 2) *A blessing for the one who says it.*

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. ¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

“You better pray that God forgives you, because I never will.” Victims of a crime or a relationship gone sour might express such a sentiment. They might think that not forgiving the perpetrator gives them a sense of justice over what was done to them – freeing them from the continued hurt they feel. What many people don’t realize is that the exact opposite is true: that, by not forgiving the person who hurt them, they are allowing themselves to be victimized over and over again.

Today, with the example of Joseph and his brothers, we are going to focus on the blessing of forgiveness, under the theme: **“I forgive you.”** 1) *These words are a blessing to the one that hears them.* 2) *They are also a blessing to the one who says them.*

Part One: A Blessing For The One Who Hears It.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is certainly one of the most touching stories in the Bible. Many years earlier, while Joseph was still a teen, his brothers threw him into a cistern in the desert. Why? Because they were jealous that their father seemed to love him best. They wanted to get rid of Joseph so badly that they were ready to kill him. But instead of killing him, they sold Joseph to some foreign merchants as a slave - figuring that it would be the last time they saw him.

But God had other plans for Joseph. He guided him through years of slavery and unjust imprisonment to bring him exactly to the place where he wanted Joseph to be: as Pharaoh’s advisor during a most devastating famine. The LORD guided Joseph’s life in such a way that he might use his high position to save his family from death. And this is exactly what he did!

Joseph’s brothers had been living in Egypt for 17 years and had experienced nothing but love from him. Joseph forgave them and provided for their every need. Nevertheless, Joseph’s brother’s lived in constant fear. How could Joseph be so merciful to them when they had ignored his cries for mercy so many years earlier. They really meant to kill him. How could Joseph ever forgive them for that?

Look at what sin does, dear Christian. See the pain and mistrust it causes: burdening the conscience long after the sin has been forgiven. Satan tempts us to doubt God’s magnificent mercy by getting us to think:

“Yes, I experience nothing but good from God, but how long will this last? I have sinned so many times. He can’t always forgive me.”

Look at how the sinful heart despairs, even when it experiences nothing but good from the Lord. What should we do when we feel this way? Do what Joseph’s brothers did: confess your sin and plead for his mercy.

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

Confession is good for the soul. Instead of trying to hide their fear and allow their mistrust to grow, the brothers decided to confess their sin to Joseph and plead for mercy. Not only were they willing to say sorry, but they show their repentance was genuine by doing two things: First of all they called themselves “servants of the God of your father” (showing their faith in the promised Savior from sin), and secondly they show their willingness to make restitution for their sin by becoming Joseph’s slaves. Why was this second part important? Because repentance without (on a human level) a willingness to repair or make amends for the wrong done, is no repentance at all.

Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph had forgiven his brothers a long time ago. His actions had proved it. He was touched, yes even saddened, by the fact that his brothers were still carrying the guilt of their sin. He spoke tenderly to them. He did not deny that they sinned, but reassured them that God both forgave them and was able to turn their evil actions to accomplish His good purposes. He reassured them of his own forgiveness too.

What a blessing for Joseph’s brothers! They no longer had to live in fear or harbor any doubts in their minds about Joseph’s love for them. They were free from guilt. They were forgiven, and how blessed they felt!

Dear Christian, do you want peace? Then confess your sins to those you have sinned against - not just with a passing “Oh, sorry about that.” No, truly repent to your brother and sister in Christ - realizing what effect your sin has on your relationship with them. Covering your sin up will not bring peace, but will continue to feed your guilt and make you question your brother's or sister's loving actions towards you.

Confess your sins – first of all to God against whom you also sinned; trusting that He forgives you, for Jesus’ sake. How so? Because Jesus, through his death and resurrection, paid for your sins in full. You can claim to be His servant, just as Joseph’s brothers did, and trust that He is your God.

Then go and repent to the person you sinned against, showing both your sorrow and genuine desire to make things right again. Your brother or sister in Christ will speak kind words to you. There is nothing more liberating for the conscience than hearing words of forgiveness spoken to us by the one we sinned against.

“But, what if he or she doesn’t forgive me?” If that is the case, you can, nevertheless be assured that your sins are forgiven by God. The LORD will deal with your unforgiving brother or sister in his time. You, however, can be at peace.

“I forgive you.” What a blessing it is to hear these words spoken, but it is no less of a blessing to be able to speak them.

Part Two: A blessing for the one who says it.

We all understand how forgiveness is a blessing to the one who sinned. But how can it be a blessing for the one who was sinned against? Our text shows us how.

Joseph was a wise man who understood something that very few people get: no matter what they have done and how much it hurt, forgive the person who sins against you. To be clear, the forgiveness I am talking about now is not telling the person who doesn’t give two hoots about Christ that God forgives them and that they are going to heaven. I am talking about human forgiveness: the ability to say, “Even though you hurt me so badly, I still forgive you.”

Let’s look at Joseph’s example to explain what I mean.

If there was any person who had a reason to hate his brothers, it would have been Joseph. But he was a godly man, who realized that the only thing “hating” his brothers would do was to draw himself away from the Lord and make life more miserable. Joseph confessed his own sinfulness, and how God loved and forgave him. Was he better than God that he should not forgive his brothers?

Joseph also kept the big picture in mind: that God was working in all the things that happened to him for good (cf. Romans 8:28). He didn’t deny the fact that his brothers sinned, but he realized that God was even using their sin to carry out his good and gracious will.

All these thoughts led Joseph to forgive his brothers from the heart - even before they asked for forgiveness. Proof of this is seen in how he supported his brothers and their families even before they confessed their sin to him.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God wants us to forgive others from the heart. Our Gospel reading urges us to do so, and even has a warning for people who don’t: they will lose the forgiveness that God gave him. God wants us to have the same compassion toward others that he has towards us, forgiving others as God forgives us in Christ Jesus.

When someone we love hurts us, it can be very difficult to forgive them, especially if they don’t ask for it. But forgiveness brings blessings to the forgiver. What kind of blessings? The knowledge that God is going to work out this evil thing done to you for your eternal good. Our fear, love and trust in God is strengthened; and we receive a fresh appreciation of all that Christ has done to forgive us.

“But,” you might ask, “how can I forgive my husband who cheated on me? How can I forgive the man who abused my daughter? Are you saying that crimes don’t matter?” No. This is not what I am saying. Forgiveness does not ignore sin, but confronts it with love. And, loving someone sometimes means getting a divorce, sending someone to jail, or even (in the case of capitol crimes) sending someone to their death. Love does not take justice into ones own hands, but allows God and the government to exercise justice for the good of all involved.

Let me illustrate what I mean with a Bible story. David committed adultery with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife. In order to cover up his sin, he had Uriah killed. God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David with this sin. David repented, and Nathan immediately pronounced God's forgiveness. At the same time, God also said that the child Bathsheba bore would die. Even though he was forgiven, David still had to suffer the consequences of his sin in order to teach both him, and those who knew of the situation, the seriousness of sin (cf. 2 Samuel 11:1-12:24).

Forgiving someone is not a matter of saying: "Don't worry about it, stuff happens, I understand." Rather, it is thinking: "Yes, I was sinned against and that sin truly hurt, but I, with God's help, forgive the perpetrator. I trust that, in some way, God will turn this evil around for His glory and my eternal good. I will lay this matter at His feet for justice, and ask God to help me deal with the situation. I pray that the person who sinned against me might repent and find salvation in Christ before he dies."

Forgiveness, then, is an attitude of the heart: one that puts God's desire to save all people ahead of the feeling: "I've been wronged." And when we, with the Spirit's help, can have such an attitude towards the person who sinned against us, we will soon find peace for our souls – no longer victimized by the painful memories our sinful lust for revenge keeps stirring up in our minds."

"I forgive you!" This statement truly is a blessing for both the hearer and the speaker. May God always give us the courage to truly repent and ask for forgiveness. May the Holy Spirit also grant us a willing spirit to forgive those who sin against us so that our souls might always be at peace, basking in the great mercy the LORD has shown us. Amen.