

JOSEPH: FAITH AND FORGIVENESS

MATTHEW 18:21-35

Today, we continue our sermon series on Our Family Tree and look more closely at those who make up our extended spiritual family in the Old Testament. As I was reflecting on this week's family member, Joseph, my mind quickly went to the many men that I served when pastoring the Dream Center Metro in Tampa-Clearwater area of Florida. Many of these men have gone on to be used in mighty ways by the Lord.

What I learned alongside these men is that our lives will experience offenses and pain especially in our relationships with other people. We will be faced with these challenges even if we try to avoid them because we are living with people who are imperfect like us. We live in a world where we experience way too much brokenness in our lives, our relationships, our families, our workplaces, and our communities.

Satan has a plan to divide and conquer us and attack our faith in Christ. When we harbor bitterness and anger towards one another, we are doing exactly what Satan wants us to do, withholding forgiveness and weakening our faith. The devil does not have to attack us on all fronts. He can simply focus on one front. This one area of our lives - forgiveness - is bigger than most of us want to admit. We should take heed when Jesus tell us we will be forgiven only when we forgive others for their trespasses.

Our response to the world's offenses and Satan's attacks can either break us or make us and in doing so might also affect the lives of others around us. Jesus showed us how to deal with life's battles in ways that will give us freedom and joy. Are we willing to follow His way of facing our hurts? Are we willing to let Him direct our course of action when others trespass against us?

In Joseph's story, we gain some better understanding of why forgiveness is so important from God's perspective:

- When we face conflicts and challenges in life, we are either motivated by fear and bitterness or by love. Fear and bitterness tear us apart and builds walls while responding in love brings reconciliation and builds bridges.
- How we live out our lives today is determined primarily by how we have responded to the circumstances in our past. We can't control, change, or stop the choices and actions of others towards us but we can control our reaction to them.
- We are called to make allowances for each other's faults and forgive those who offend us. Remember, the Lord forgave us, so we can follow His example and forgive others.
- We can more fully show our faith by engaging with others through love and forgiveness.

God is asking us to love and honor others by showing compassion and forgiveness to them. When we forgive, we will receive the benefit of God's grace and mercy in our own lives. As we see in today's message from Matthew 18, the only way that we can fully experience God's forgiveness and freedom is by trusting in God's wisdom, embracing His heart and plans for our lives, and showing the love of the Lord to all those around us.

Today, we will explore some key truths about our role in forgiveness and look more closely at what we can learn from Joseph about how God desires us to respond. Through his example, we see the pathway for forgiveness unfold for us to:

- Initiate the Interaction
- Recognize the Root Cause
- Avoid being the Victim
- Face Our Feelings
- Restore the Relationship

Our reading from 1 John 2:7–14, reminds us, *"⁷ Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one...⁹ Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. ¹¹ But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.*

Forgiveness can come with time but also must be intentional on our part. Our emotional response matters little compared to our willful response. In our selfishness, we rally around a host of excuses for not forgiving. These include: anger, jealousy, fear, pride, self-righteousness, guilt, suffering, and worry. We need to move beyond the excuses to seek restoration and reconciliation in our relationships and respond as God calls us to do.

The story of Joseph teaches us we can forgive in all circumstances and embrace what God has planned for us. When disagreements, harsh words, emotional or physical abuse tear apart our relationships, we can look to God's story throughout Joseph's life for the hope and guidance we need. God gave Joseph the faith to see how everything in his life to happened according to God's plan and purpose. As his journey unfolded, God put Joseph in a position of authority to help his family and others through a season of famine. Joseph never excuses his brothers' sin rather he sees how God uses their sins, and all the difficulties he suffered as a result of them, for God's own benefit.

The kind of forgiveness Joseph extended to his brothers is forgiveness God himself has shown us. God forgave us in spite of our sinful behaviors and without us having to ask for forgiveness. He forgave us by taking his Son to the cross for our sins. The Jewish leaders' jealousy of Jesus and Pilate's lack of courage alone did not take Jesus to the cross. The underlying sinful nature of the people to turn against one another, and their lack of repentance pushed the nails through his hands.

Through the example of Joseph's story, God reminds us that our lives are a journey with many seasons of challenging circumstances. Joseph was one of twelve sons of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. As the first-born of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, Joseph was his father's favorite son. His brothers may have been able to put up with their father's favoritism but they couldn't deal with what they saw as Joseph's arrogant claims. When Joseph tells them about the dreams he had in which his brothers and parents bowed down to him, they became jealous.

One day when the brothers were out tending the flocks they decided to take revenge on Joseph and throw him in a ditch. As they were doing this, some slave traders passed their way. The brothers decide to sell Joseph to them and tell their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Joseph didn't give up hope or lose his faith even in the face of death.

In Egypt, Joseph faithfully served the captain of the palace guard until he was falsely accused of sexual harassment. He was imprisoned and there he languished for over two years before Pharaoh turned to Joseph for help in interpreting his dreams. With God's help, Joseph explained the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams and was elevated to second in command – a position he used to oversee Egypt's food distribution.

It was under these circumstances that Joseph came face to face with his brothers once again. The growing famine at home had forced Joseph's brothers to come to Egypt for food. When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them immediately but they did not recognize Joseph.

When Joseph did reveal his true identity, how do you think his brothers felt? Do you think they were overjoyed to see him? No, they were scared, for the brother they had hated and treated poorly now had the resources of the Egyptian army to take revenge. Was revenge what Joseph had in mind for his brothers? No, at their first reunion Joseph moved to restoration and reconciliation when he forgave his brothers in his heart for what they had done. Joseph didn't just tell them they were forgiven he showed it by caring for his brothers and their families by giving them food and places to live.

Still his brothers weren't convinced. They thought that this was all part of Joseph's plan to take revenge on them when they least expected it. And so when their father died years later, the brothers thought for sure the time had come for Joseph to exact his revenge. Upon learning that his brothers still doubted his forgiveness, Joseph wept and then he said to them: "*Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?*" (Genesis 50:19b)

When we seek revenge, we set ourselves up as God thinking we can do a better job than He can. We often think that way. For instance, when someone says or does something hurtful to us, we may, at first, want to hurt them in return.

But Joseph forgave them. Then he proceeds to tell them why he is able to forgive them. As for you, you meant evil against me but God meant it for good to save lives!

How we see life, the good and the bad under God's providential care, God's overruling and trumping evil, determines how we think, feel, and ultimately respond to the difficulties of life. God calls us to live by faith, believing that all things work out for His good. Often times, we cannot see God's good purposes when we are facing dark and challenging circumstances.

From this story, we can learn what our response should be to the challenging circumstances that take place in our lives at the hands of others who have harmed us in the similar ways.

Initiate the Interaction

First, we initiate the interaction. Our human nature wants us to have the other person come seeking us out first. Unfortunately, that may never happen. We have to be like Joseph. He was a peace maker. He wasn't concerned about his brothers' attitude towards him; but instead, he took the initiative to forgive.

⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Genesis 45:5-8)

Recognize the Root Cause

Second, we need to recognize the root cause. Forgiveness is not about overlooking the problem or evading the issue. In fact, Joseph reminded his brothers about their actions when he said "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!" (Genesis 45:4, NIV84)

He did not try to minimize or hide the truth but he also did not venture into blaming and shaming them. Like Joseph, we must be careful to shed light on the truth of the circumstances in a non-judgmental way focusing on a pathway to reconciliation.

Avoid Being the Victim

Third, we need to avoid being the victim. Life is full of hurts and it always will be! As long as we are alive, people are going to hurt us, offend us and disappoint us. But we don't need to be the "victim" of their offenses. We can learn to rise above life's disappointments.

Joseph appears to never have harbored resentment because in the very next verse he said, "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." (Genesis 45:5, NIV84)

Face Our Feelings

Fourth, we need to face our feelings. *"Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him."* (Genesis 45:14–15, NIV84)

After introducing himself to his brothers, Joseph wept loudly. He let go of years of bitterness that had put distance between him and his brothers as he invited them to get close to him. Likewise, you and I must show the love of God to those who might have offended us. They also may be afraid of how we might react and so, we must be the ones to extend grace and call them closer to us to experience the true love and forgiveness being offered to them.

Restore the Relationship

Lastly, we must seek to restore the relationship. In Matthew 5:23–24, Jesus tells us, *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."*

Jesus seems to be saying that more important than worshipping him is the need for us to first forgive those who might have wronged us; especially if it is someone to whom we are deeply connected in our faith and family.

Let me share a brief illustration of the power and impact of forgiveness that I recall studying while in HS youth group. In *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal writes of an incident that occurred during the time he was held in a concentration camp and lived out his life as an inmate. His is a true story of a personal journey through one of history's most difficult and trying events, the Holocaust. His story deals with the "possibilities and limits of forgiveness." (Excerpts from <https://www.facinghistory.org/sunflower-synopsis>)

One day, he was sent to clean medical waste at a converted army hospital for wounded German soldiers. On the way he passed military cemetery . . . and on each grave there was planted a sunflower . . . he stared spellbound . . . and envied the dead soldiers. Each had a sunflower to connect him with the living world and would bring warmth to others as they visited their graves.

He realized there would be no sunflower for him or those he loved. He would be buried in a mass grave, where corpses would be piled on top of each other. No sunflowers would ever bring light into their darkness.

As Simon arrived the hospital to clean, a nurse pulled him aside and introduced him to Karl, a 21-year old dying Nazi soldier - head was completely covered in bandages, with openings only for his mouth, nose and ears. Karl, the soldier, tells Simon, "I know at this moment that thousands are dying. I am resigned to dying soon, but before that I want to talk about an experience which is torturing me. Otherwise I cannot die in peace - I must tell you of the horrible deeds, tell you because, you are a Jew."

Karl went on to tell Simon about the many times he was ordered to execute masses of Jews – including women and infants among the thousands killed. As he lie there in the hospital waiting for his own death, He shared, “the pains in my body are terrible, but worse still is my conscience . . . I cannot die . . . without coming clean . . . In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are. I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough . . . I know that what I am asking is almost too much for anyone, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.”

Simon left the room without a word. When his group returned to the hospital the next day, the same nurse came to Simon and told him that Karl had died. Over the next years of the war, time and again, through all his suffering, Simon thought of Karl and wondered if he should have forgiven him.

Now as we think about our own lives. What good will it do for us to hold onto the sins committed against us in the past? What good does it do for our souls if we refuse to forgive those who sinned against us long ago? When we hold grudges it only builds bitterness and hatred in our hearts. But when we realize that God has a good purpose in our lives, it makes life so much more bearable. We don't get stuck in our past and continue to dwell on it.

Instead, we say, “what good can work from this? How did God use this for my growth?” Instead of being angry with God, we will thank God for allowing difficult circumstances to come into our lives. This life is too short to harbor bitterness. We cannot be God's children if we refuse to forgive. We will also be lying to God if we say forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us if we don't do it. If we want the blood of Jesus to flow in us, we have no choice but to forgive. Without forgiveness, we will forever remain unforgiven.

So how do we apply the lesson Joseph learned about forgiveness to our lives? We can begin by listening to God's promises to use everything for His ultimate good. Not only does understanding God's will for us help us to forgive others unconditionally but also understanding God's will for others is an additional motivation to forgive.

Forgiveness comes to us through Christ. The willingness and ability to forgive comes through Christ alone. But the confidence to forgive can only be found through trust in God and from the kind of understanding of his will that Joseph had. He understood that no matter what someone did to him God would make good out of it or good could come from it. Joseph also understood that God's will to reach people with his forgiveness is often shown through the forgiveness He asks us to show others.

Philip Yancey in his work *"What's So Amazing About Grace?"* has given us a great quote on the meaning of forgiveness:

"At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy."

So much of our Christian life is wrapped up in believing that we receive our true grace from God. Our ability to forgive those who harm us. Our ability to cope with hassles, hurts, hardships and heartaches of life are all God's grace at work. Joseph believed in God's sovereign grace realizing "God intended everything in his life for good."

The story of Joseph is so much like the story of Jesus! In both cases, God allowed one man to go through incredible suffering in order, in the end, to bring rescue to all of God's people! Joseph lived his life for the good of God's people, preserving his family, so that they would become the nation of Israel, from which the deliverer could come to save the nations. As Christians, who have put their faith in Christ and follow his teachings, our lives are to be lived by serving others.

Joseph looked to God and found a way to forgive. Can we do the same? Some questions we can ask the Holy Spirit to place on our hearts. Who has hurt us in such a deep way that you cannot get over it? Have we asked God to help us forgive this person? What is keeping us from forgiving that person and moving on with our lives? Do we think we can take God's forgiveness for our sin and keep bitterness in our hearts toward those who sinned against us? Are we willing to confess our inability to forgive today and lay it down before the Lord?

Let us pray...

Matthew 18:21–35 (NIV84)

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Genesis 45:1–15 (NIV84)

Joseph Makes Himself Known

45 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it.

³ Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

⁸ “So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. ⁹ Now hurry back to my father and say to him, ‘This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don’t delay. ¹⁰ You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.’

¹² “You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. ¹³ Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly.”

¹⁴ Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him. Genesis 50:15–21 (NIV84)

Joseph Reassures His Brothers

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.

1 John 2:7–14 (NIV84)

⁷ Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. ⁸ Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

⁹ Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. ¹¹ But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

¹² I write to you, dear children,
because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

¹³ I write to you, fathers,
because you have known him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, dear children,
because you have known the Father.

¹⁴ I write to you, fathers,
because you have known him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God lives in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.