

“How Can We Forgive as God Forgives?”

Forgive as God forgives. As a concept, it is simple enough to understand. In practice, however, it is not so easy. Our sermon text today offers us an example of forgiveness in action. It invites us to ask, “How can we forgive as God forgives?”

To understand and appreciate this act of forgiveness, we need to review a little bit of the backstory of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph’s father was Jacob, who was also called Israel, from which we get the name of the Israelites. Jacob had 12 sons in all, from 4 different women. This was not the formula for peace and harmony in the family. Jacob’s favorite wife was named Rachel, and Rachel was Joseph’s mother. As the first son of his favorite wife, Joseph was Jacob’s favorite son. Jacob gave gifts to Joseph that he didn’t give to his other sons. He had given to Joseph a special coat, a colorful robe, which clearly set him apart from his brothers.

Naturally, this was a recipe for extreme sibling rivalry. Joseph’s brothers detested him. They were jealous and envious and even vengeful. One day, Joseph went to see his brothers as they tended their flocks. When the brothers saw Joseph coming, they decided that they would finally give him what he had coming. They would kill him. Well, they never went quite that far, but they did capture Joseph, and they sold him to a band of slave traders. Meanwhile, they sent word back to Jacob their father that Joseph must have died, offering his blood-stained coat as evidence.

Joseph made his way as a slave down to Egypt. He served well as a slave and was put in charge of his master’s household. He was a faithful servant to his master, even to the point of rejecting the advances of his master’s wife, who had taken an inappropriate interest in Joseph.

Well, the wife of Joseph’s master did not appreciate her advances being rebuffed, so she lied to her husband and convinced him to have Joseph thrown in prison. You can imagine how Joseph might have held a grudge against his brothers. You can maybe start to understand why years later they would be worried about Joseph’s reaction to them. Every time he worked hard, and faithfully, and diligently to get ahead, he fell further behind. Every possible opportunity that had been placed before him were one by one stripped away until he was imprisoned in a land far from home, and his jealous brothers, who had done to him unthinkable atrocities, had started it all.

Please understand that I have only been summarizing and quickly speaking through this account. To get from Jacob and his first marriage all the way to our sermon text today, we need to cover over 20 chapters of the book of Genesis. But stop for a moment and put yourself in the position of Joseph in prison. How angry would you have been? How many times would you have plotted revenge against those brothers? How many times would you have cursed them for what they had done to you?

Keep that background in mind as we finish the backstory. Joseph was trustworthy and worked diligently even in prison. The guards took note of him and gave him special responsibilities and privileges. And God continued to bless Joseph. God gave Joseph the special ability to interpret dreams. Joseph thought that he had finally found his way out of prison when he accurately predicted the release from prison and reinstatement of the king’s chief cupbearer. But still Joseph was forgotten in prison.

Years later, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had a troubling dream. He was so distraught over his dream that he eventually tracked down Joseph in prison to find out its meaning. And finally things had turned around. Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh’s dream and predicted years of famine that would hit Egypt, but not before seven years of plenty. He recommended a plan: to have the Egyptians store up plenty of food to last through the years of famine. And Joseph was put in charge of carrying out the plan. He was made a ruler over Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

And so the stage was set for Joseph and his brothers to reunite. Under Joseph’s careful leadership, the Egyptians stored up supplies of grain for seven years. And then. Exactly as predicted, famine struck. The famine was so harsh and lasted so long that throughout the whole region the only place where food was to be found was in Egypt. Joseph’s brothers had to come to Egypt to buy food from Joseph, whom they did not recognize, just to survive.

Joseph's family did more than just survive. At Joseph's invitation after he revealed himself to them, Joseph's brothers and father and their entire households moved to Egypt where they could more easily outlast the famine. Joseph gave them excellent pasture land where they could raise their flocks and he provided them with the food that they needed.

Still more years passed, and Jacob passed away. Joseph oversaw the embalming of his father and honored his father's wishes to be buried in the Promised Land. After burying him and mourning his passing, Joseph and his brothers returned to Egypt. From there our text picks up: **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."**

I don't know whether Jacob ever told his sons these things or not, but I do know that they were worried. They hadn't forgotten how horrendously they had treated Joseph. Perhaps Joseph had been kind to them for the sake of his father. Perhaps now that dad was no longer around, Joseph was going to finally get even with them. After all, he was at that very moment the second most powerful man in the world.

Doesn't that say something about how difficult it is for us to forgive? Why were the brothers so worried that Joseph would get even with them? Wasn't it because that's exactly what they would have done if they were in his position? Isn't that what you would have done? Isn't that what you have done? How many grudges have you kept for days or for weeks or even for years? How many wrongs have totally ruined friendships and family relationships because as sinful people we have such a hard time forgiving each other?

But Joseph did not react that way. He cried that his brothers expected him to do so. When they fell at his feet to beg him for mercy, promising to be his servants, Joseph reassured them. He had forgiven them. He wasn't holding a grudge. His support for their families was genuine, and he had no plans to do anything else.

Forgiving like God forgives means putting sins in the past. It means not holding them against sinners, not bringing them up again. It means getting rid of grudges. But how do we possibly do that? The way that Joseph did, by remembering God's mercy.

Joseph knew that he wasn't perfect. Joseph understood that God had forgiven his sins and had blessed him in so many ways. Joseph saw that God had made him ruler in Egypt so that he could save his own life, and the lives of his brothers and their families, and so many more. **But 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.**

In other words, borrowing the picture from Jesus' parable in today's Gospel (Matthew 18:23 ff), Joseph was a servant who knew what a great debt his master had forgiven. He knew that he couldn't go to fellow servants like his brothers and demand that they pay back their debts to him. He didn't ignore their sin. He didn't deny its seriousness. He forgave it.

How can you forgive like God forgives? Well, it starts with realizing what it means that God forgives you. You can't possibly know all of the ways that you have sinned against him. Sure, you can probably think of some. You have been unkind, or jealous, or boastful. You have thought impure thoughts and spoken impure words. You may even be particularly troubled by certain sins that you have held on to, worried that no one else would understand, that no one could possibly forgive you for that.

God knows, and God forgives. God paid the debt that we owed to him by taking it from his Son's account. Jesus died to forgive your sins, every one of them. You stand before God knowing full well that you have nothing to offer him to pay back your debts, and he tells you that he has taken pity on you and forgiven your debt and you are free to go. And now he invites you to go to your fellow servants and to treat them the same way. No matter what they've done, it pales in comparison to what God has forgiven. No matter what anyone else thinks of the situation, God says, "forgive as I have forgiven you."

It's not a hard concept, but it is impossible to do without God's strength. Forgive as God forgives. Set aside your grudges by remembering God's mercy.

The Text: Genesis 50:15–21 (NIV84)

¹⁵When 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?" ¹⁶So 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.

¹⁸His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.