

“The Path of Forgiveness”

Contemporary Contact BLANK1

A Christian teacher found herself interrupted in the middle of her lesson by two boys arguing in the back of the room. The teacher stopped the class and asked what the problem was. One of the boys, named Brian, replied that on the way to school the other boy (Luke) had hit him.

The teacher thought this would be a great opportunity to teach them and class about forgiveness. So he called the two boys to the front of the class and emphasized how much God wants us to forgive each other. Then the teacher asked the all-important question.

“Brian, will you forgive Luke?”

“Sure,” Brian said. He then made a fist and punched Luke in the stomach.

“Wait a minute,” the teacher shouted as moved in quickly to intervene. “I asked you to forgive Luke, not hit him.”

“I will forgive him,” Brian protested, “but I had to get even with him first.”

Biblical Contact

Brian’s response reminded me of what C.S. Lewis said. *“Forgiveness is a beautiful word,”* said Lewis *“until you have something to forgive.”* Most often forgiveness is a very unnatural response for the person who has been offended and hurt. If any conviction comes naturally to all people in the face of a person offense or injustice, it’s the deep-seated feeling and belief that “somebody’s got to pay.” And yet we’ve all seen where that leads. “Without forgiveness life is governed by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation.”¹

In their recent book, The Book of Forgiving, South African bishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter underline that:

*“The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive....It is the way we mend tears in the social fabric. It is the way we stop our human community from unraveling.”*²

¹ Anger Is A Choice, p. 123.

² Desmond & Mpho Tutu, The Book of Forgiving, pp. 16, 4.

Structural Contact **SLIDE2**

1) Forgiveness is difficult but essential – James 3² says “we all stumble in many ways” which is why, in one of his wedding sermons, German pastor Dietrick Bonhoeffer gave the following advice to the bride and groom: “Live together in the forgiveness of your sins, for without it no human fellowship can survive.” (i.e. your relationship will wither and die without the mending & restorative power and practices of forgiveness) Jesus often underlined the connection between our need to forgive and our need to be forgiven (Lord’s Prayer^{Mt.6}...). The 17th Century poet George Herbert put it this way, “*He that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for everyone has the need to be forgiven.*”³ We need to learn to practice forgiveness in large part because we all need forgiveness. **SLIDE3** – “If God did not forgive sinners, heaven would be empty”

In Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18²¹⁻³⁵ he also underlined our need to also forgive. But our ability to forgive is always rooted in God’s amazing grace to us. Jesus taught us that whatever God asks us to forgive will always be less than what we ourselves have been forgiven. This is different than downplaying or minimizing wrongs done to us or to others, as we saw in the video clip, and as we will see in today’s story of Joseph and his brothers (**turn to Genesis 37**). **BLANK4**

The tension driving this story arises from the breakdown of the family caused by favoritism, foolishness, jealousy, and deceit. The first episode in Gen. 37²⁻¹¹ moves from an introduction of the characters and the family tensions to a huge rift in the family with Joseph, his father’s favourite son, secretly sold off as a slave into Egypt by his jealous brothers. Perfect cover up? (**Gen. 37³¹⁻³³**)

Can you imagine how Joseph felt in the face of such injustice at the hands of his own brothers (even if they didn’t all do the deed, they all participated in the cover up)? How easy it would have been to become bitter. But “the LORD was with

³ David Augsburger, The Freedom of Forgiveness, p. 15.

Jospeh” (39^{2,3,21,23}) through the incredible ups & downs that marked his life journey. Eventually his impossible sounding God-given dream^{Ps.105:19} began to unfold in 41⁴¹ *“I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt...⁴⁴I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.”*

The years go by and the seven years of plenty foreseen by Joseph finish and make a dramatic shift to that of famine. In the providence of God, the famine forces a family reunion that none of them saw coming (cf. economic crisis, health crisis, death, etc. can be God’s means of making us face the past). Though there was grain to be bought in every part of Egypt, it so happened that a group of foreigners arrived at the main supply base where Joseph was in charge. Joseph recognized his brothers among the foreigners buying grain, and he watched them bow to the ground before him, unwittingly fulfilling his first dream (37⁵⁻⁸).⁴ Not surprisingly, they didn’t recognize him, so 42⁷ says “he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them.”^{42:7} His political interrogation masked a much more personal interrogation and test. Were they still the same old brothers that spoke so harshly & treated him with such cruelty? And how was the rest of the family, especially his father and youngest brother?

Before this moment Joseph thought this was all in the past. After all, hadn’t he let it all go with the birth of his firstborn son. Hadn’t he told himself back in 41⁵¹ that *“God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.”* (cf. Simba in *Lion King*) But now all these memories came flooding back to him, and not only to him, but to his brothers too.

“In 42²¹⁻²³ we discover that in the thirteen intervening years the guilt and recriminations experienced by Joseph’s brothers have enslaved and imprisoned them no less than Joseph’s chains had done to him.”⁵ As commentator Gordon Wenham notes,

“Nearly all the actors are trapped by their past. The brothers cannot escape the power of their past guilt...[and] live in fear of provoking a new uncontrolled

⁴ Summary from Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50*, pp. 179-180.

⁵ Walton, *Genesis*, p.678.

outburst of paternal sorrow if they take Benjamin and fail to return him.”⁶

Even Joseph, who appears to be in control of the situation, is overtaken by emotion^{42:24} as he hears the first remorseful comments by his brothers⁷ for the way they treated him.^{42:21-22} It became a critical turning point on the path to forgiveness *and* reconciliation. Though I don’t have the time to walk through the rest of the story, please take the time to read through it this week. It is filled with important principles, a number of which I want to point out.

1) **Forgiveness is difficult but essential** **SLIDE5**

2) **Forgiveness is a process and a point** – **SLIDE6** That is, any moment when forgiveness is granted or received, is always part of a larger journey, a process, a path. The path to forgiveness is rarely is as straight or simple as some people make it out to be. (e.g. Assiniboine River) **SLIDE7**

David Augsburger’s wrote a book to point out not only what forgiveness is, but what it isn’t. **SLIDE8** Forgiveness is not pretending you weren’t hurt. Forgiveness is not saying that what I or the other person did wasn’t wrong. Forgiveness doesn’t mean you immediately or always trust that person again or that you should without evidence of true repentance and change.⁸ (e.g. Joseph’s test of his brothers...AND God’s test of Joseph...) **SLIDE9**

3) **Forgiveness requires change** (new awareness, new inflow of power)

- Time doesn’t heal all wounds, but some wounds need time to heal^{13-20yrs}
- For our readiness (or repentance) and their readiness (or repentance)

“Divine forgiveness is dependent on the loving nature of God. But while offered to all, pardon is not given to all. Impediments to forgiveness include stubborn unrepentance^{Mk.4:12}, unbelief^{Acts2:37-38}, denial of wrongdoing^{1Jn.1:8,10}, and refusal to forgive other people^{Mt.6:14-15}.”⁹

- In many NT texts, forgiveness is commanded to be given those who regret their offense. For example in Luke 17³ Jesus gives this condition: “if your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if* he repents, forgive him...” (cf. Mt. 18¹⁷ “*if* he listens to you”)

⁶ Gordon Wenham, Genesis 16-50 (WBC), p. 412.

⁷ As Walton notes, “They confess to hard-heartedness (42²¹) and bloodguilt (42²²).” Genesis, p. 678.

⁸ See 1 Samuel 24. In v.17 Saul admits, “You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly.” And we read in v.22 “Then Saul returned home” but it also says, “*but David and his men went up to the stronghold.*”

⁹ Gary Shogren, “Forgiveness (NT)” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, 2:835.

4) Forgiveness requires letting go SLIDE10 (of personal vengeance, of waiting for the other person to change/repent, etc.)

- Putting the debt (& debtor) in God's hands and trusting him to deal with both as he sees fit (Rom. 12¹⁹; Dt. 32³⁵).
- "Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with the chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness, that person will be our jailor."Tutu,p.16
- Willing for God to do it His way & in His time (Rom. 12¹⁷; Prov. 20²²; 24²⁹)?
- Work with God on "my stuff" & let God work with them on "their stuff" (cf. Rom. 12¹⁸)

5) Forgiveness has the potential to reconcile the relationship SLIDE11

- "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12¹⁸)
- Distinguish "forgiveness" from "reconciliation" (e.g. David & Saul, Jacob & Esau)
- Reconciliation and restoration is the goal, but is not always fully achieved because "full forgiveness" is two-way. (e.g. A Peacemaking Model by mediator Ron Claassen¹⁰) SLIDE12
- E.g. a readiness/willingness to forgive/pardon + repentance (e.g. Luke 15)

Conclusion (& preparation for communion)

- **VIDEO** of the Matthew West Song birthed out of Rene's story...¹¹

¹⁰ <http://peace.fresno.edu/docs/model.shtml>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9J6xOT3Ldw>