

## THE SNITCH GETS SNATCHED

As our young people are gearing up to begin or return to college, I was thinking of one theology professor I had at the University of Dayton. For at least 15-30 minutes per class, we students could count on this professor to stray off of his subject and just ramble about anything.

He was aware of this and good-natured about it. He admitted to us that once, he asked a class what they liked best about his lectures. And one student replied, “When you say ‘Finally.’”

But I am grateful to that professor for one of those tangent lectures. For one day, he spoke at length about forgiveness. And he suggested that those of us planning to become pastors should preach at least one Sunday a year about what forgiveness is, and what forgiveness is not. So, consider this your first annual sermon on forgiveness.

After all, forgiveness is the cornerstone of our Christian faith. Even dying on the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” However, forgiveness was at the root of our faith long before Jesus’ time, as is evident in the story of Joseph.

Joseph’s story begins with his father, Jacob. A couple of weeks ago, we talked about Jacob and the problems caused when his father showed favoritism to the first-born son Esau. Jacob did not learn from his father’s mistakes, for he makes no bones about the fact that Joseph was his favorite son, presenting him with a coat design not for a shepherd, but an overseer.

If that weren’t enough to make his brothers angry, Joseph adds fuel to the fire by being the family snitch. When his brothers misbehave, Joseph is the tattletale. And to make matters worse, Joseph can’t even keep his dreams to himself. He shares a couple of his dreams with his brothers – dreams in which they all bow down low before him.

They become so furious with him that when the opportunity presents itself, they snatch the snitch with the intent of getting rid of him. Initially they want to kill him, but one brother

talks them instead into selling Joseph to a passing caravan. And so, Joseph is taken as a slave into Egypt.

Over the next 15 years, he endures slavery and promotion, false accusations and prison, but finally is elevated to being second only to Pharaoh. And in that capacity, he is stunned one day to see his brothers come and bow low before him, as they come to seek food after famine has struck his homeland.

And it is clear Joseph remembers well what they had done to him. That's the first rule about forgiveness: As Christians, we are not called to forgive and forget. Nothing in scripture says humans can forget. God can: we're told in Jeremiah 31:34 that when God forgives us, He will remember our sin no more.

But we are not God. Even when we choose to forgive, we need to remember the wrong done to us because we need to learn from it.

It is a sad example, but true: A woman came to her pastor after learning that her daughter had been sexually molested by the woman's father. The woman was understandably shaken, but the pastor felt there was something else under the surface.

When he asked her, the woman admitted when she had been a child, her father had molested her. All of them had attended church, and her understanding of forgiveness was that she had to forget the injustice done to her. So she did. She got out of the household as soon as she could to distance herself from her father, but then repressed all the memories because she thought that's what one does as a part of forgiveness. Besides, it was too painful to remember.

But she now realized denial is not a part of forgiveness. In forgetting, she had also forgotten that her father had never acknowledged his wrong-doing. If she had allowed herself to

remember, she could still have forgiven her father – but also recognized the risks and protected her daughter.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Andrew Park said it best in my theology class when he said as Christians, we are not called to forgive and forget but rather to forgive and remember – but remember with a healed memory. When we forgive, we can remember the act done against us without it reviving physical or mental pain. That memory no longer dictates who we are in the future.

A second part of forgiveness is, it is not dependent upon an apology from the one who has wronged us. When Joseph first sees his brothers standing before him, he treats them gruffly and actually imprisons them briefly. It is a ruse that ultimately leads to reconciliation with the brothers – but it is a path to reconciliation started by him, not the brothers.

If our forgiveness is dependent upon an apology, we may never be able to forgive. For one thing, the person who has wronged us may no longer be alive, or even unaware of the pain they caused. Or in some cases, a person may withhold their apology to continue to hold power over us, keeping us in the role of victim.

God is never going to call upon us to do something that is impossible, and so forgiveness is not contingent upon an apology. After all, forgiveness is something we do for ourselves, not for the other person. If we withhold our forgiveness, it doesn't hurt the other person; we, on the other hand, are likely to suffer from insomnia, ulcers, headaches and all other kinds of ailments. Forgiveness is a release to us, allowing us to regain control of our own lives.

That's why we are to take the first step and forgive. But remember: forgiveness is not just a one-time decision; it also is a process. The deeper the hurt inflicted upon us, the longer the time it takes for us to forgive fully and completely.

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<sup>1</sup> David Stoop, *Real Solutions for Forgiving the Unforgivable* (Vine Books: Ann Arbor, MI), pp. 26-27.

When we're told Joseph was sold into slavery, he doesn't call back over his shoulder, "I forgive you." When he is sitting in prison wrongly accused of a crime, he doesn't pray, "Lord, I forgive my brothers." When the brothers are first standing before him, and Joseph clearly recognizes him, he doesn't immediately jump up and say, "Brothers, I forgive you."

No. Joseph initially imprisons the brothers, accusing them of being spies. When they tell of their father and another brother living at home, Joseph gives them the grain they need and send them home – but he holds his brother Simeon in jail until their return. Once the brothers returned to Joseph, then his forgiveness was fully extended. But it took time.

As Christians, we think we need to forgive someone immediately. If the injury is slight – for example, if someone takes the last cupcake when they knew you hadn't had any – then forgiveness should be immediately extended and completed within a few seconds.

But when someone has hurt us beyond compare – if they have broken trust with us, deliberately and intentionally wronged us – we need to make up our minds to forgive that person as soon as we can, but the act of forgiveness will take place over years, not minutes.

And once we make up our minds to forgive someone, God gives us the ability to forgive. We might begin by praying for that person. Jesus told us to pray for our enemies – isn't that the very definition of Christian love? Even though we may not like a person, and have plenty of reason not to, God invites us to pray for them.

This is not to say that forgiveness means there is no accountability. I know there are some who don't like the fact that Joseph tricked his brothers for a time. But it sent a message to the brothers once they knew who Joseph was. Their actions had caused a great deal of pain to Joseph, and not knowing the welfare of Simeon in prison for a year certainly gave them a glimpse into that pain.

Forgiveness never means we condone the evil because God doesn't condone evil, even when He forgives the sinner. We're reminded by Paul in Romans 6:1-2, "Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more kindness and forgiveness?" And Paul answers his own question with, "Of course not!" Just because we have forgiven someone doesn't mean that there are no repercussions for the hurt they caused. At the very least, there is a trust that is broken, and that trust will take time and actions on their part if it is to be restored. And if a crime has been committed, we still expect them to serve time for what they did even if we have forgiven them.

Above all else, however, I want to make sure that as Christians we understand something very fundamental when we talk about forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. It takes one to forgive; it takes two to be reconciled.

God calls on all of us to forgive. However, whether we can ever be reunited with the person who has hurt us depends on whether that individual. If he or she does not acknowledge the hurt and are likely to hurt us again, reconciliation cannot take place. I believe God's wish is that we could all be reconciled, but God's greater wish is that each of us can be whole individuals. Forgiveness brings us to that wholeness, but that doesn't mean we can automatically trust the person we have forgiven if they do not demonstrate a desire to change.

In Joseph's case, he put his brothers to the ultimate test to see if they have changed. When the famine continues, Jacob's sons have to return to Egypt for more food. And when they came, they brought with them – at Joseph's earlier command – his only full-blooded brother Benjamin. And Joseph responds by throwing a wonderful banquet for his brothers.

But in the morning as the boys prepare to leave, Joseph has his golden cup hidden in Benjamin's belongings. And when the supposed theft is exposed, Joseph announces to the

brothers that they are all free to go back to their homeland. He will only require that the thief, Benjamin, remain as his slave.

This is a test on Joseph's part to see if he can trust his brothers to be reconciled to them. There is the possibility they are still the no-good guys they were before. After all, it has been clear that Benjamin is now Daddy's favorite. Are the brothers willing to throw him to the wolves for the sake of saving their own skins – and maybe trying again to win their father's favor?

But that doesn't happen. Judah – the brother who had suggested Joseph be sold to the caravan – begs that Joseph allow him to be kept as a slave instead of Benjamin, because he knows the loss of the younger brother will be a fatal blow to their father. And because Joseph knows his brothers have changed, he finally ends the charade. He reveals his identity to his stunned brothers. He assures them that despite their attempt to do evil, God has turned it into an act of mercy. Their family will be spared the famine because Joseph is in a place of power to help them all move to Egypt.

We all love happily-ever-after stories. For God, that is the ending whenever we are able to forgive another. May we this week end the pain and hurt in our lives by seeking God's courage and assistance to forgive.