

Learning to Forgive Family Members

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, August 15, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 45:1-15, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

You're familiar with the story. Joseph had been a teenager and Jacob's favorite son. His brothers hated him because of the favoritism shown him by his father. Joseph didn't help matters. He had dreams of his brothers bowing down to him. His dreams infuriated his brothers. They hatched a plot to murder Joseph. At the last moment, one of his brothers, Judah, suggested that, instead of killing Joseph they sell him into slavery. Having sold Joseph, the brothers returned home and led their father to believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Years passed and Joseph, through a series of adventures recounted in the book of Genesis, rose to a position of power and authority in Egypt second only to Pharaoh. Through Joseph's wisdom Egypt was prepared when famine came to that region of the world. The famine led Joseph's brothers to travel from Palestine to Egypt to buy food. In fulfillment of Joseph's teenage dreams, his brothers bowed before him begging for food, not recognizing that the brother they had sold into slavery years before was now in a position to avenge himself. **If ever a family stood in need of forgiveness it was Joseph's brothers. Every family I know of needs forgiveness.** In the family, we're supposed to protect and love each other, not betray and destroy each other. But the people who hurt us worst are often people closest to us. Many of us can remember the pain and humiliation we've suffered at the hands of family members. Sometimes the hurt and humiliation is so painful that family members part ways and never speak to one another again, ever. Maybe someone you love has deeply hurt and angered you. You're unable to forgive. Do you ever wonder what life would be like if you *could* forgive?

Forgiveness is never easy even under the best of circumstances. We nurse grudges a long time. By nature we don't easily forgive anybody. But forgiveness is most difficult when it involves family members. We neither seek or give forgiveness very easily when it comes to family members. If anyone had a right to withhold forgiveness from family members, Joseph did. When Joseph realize that the starving men who bowed before him were his brothers, men

who had sold him into slavery, he must have relived painful memories of rejection and hatred. Yet, somehow, he came eventually to forgive his brothers. How did Joseph manage to forgive?

For one thing, Joseph forgave slowly. He initially concealed his identity from his brothers. He accused them of being spies. He threw his brother Simeon into prison. “Let’s see how he feels about being unjustly imprisoned.” He held Simeon hostage until his brothers returned to Joseph with their youngest brother Benjamin. When they finally arrived with Benjamin, Joseph accused Benjamin of stealing his silver cup. All the while he concealed his identity. He reduced his brothers to abject terror. He played with them like a cat playing with a mouse. He teased them and mentally tortured them. He took his vengeance before he forgave his brothers. *This is not an example for us to follow.* But probably all of us have exacted vengeance against family members who have offended us far less harmfully than Joseph’s brothers. We withhold affection. We withdraw emotionally. We refuse to talk. We lick our wounds. We smack our lips over grievances long past. We savor the pain we’re giving and the pain we’re giving back. We want to see family members grovel and bow before us before we begin forgiving them. But all of this reminds us that forgiveness comes slowly.

Secondly, it’s easier to forgive someone who is sorry for what they’ve done. Joseph found forgiveness impossible to withhold when he saw that his brothers were sincerely penitent. His brothers had changed over the years. They weren’t the same jealous, hate filled men who had sold Joseph into slavery so many years before. People do change. Family members change. The brother who betrayed you years ago may now have become tender and vulnerable and penitent. *But what about people who haven’t changed?* Should we withhold forgiveness from them? Should we waste our priceless forgiveness on someone who doesn’t want it or who doesn’t admit he or she needs it? Jesus helps us answer that question when he prayed on the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Forgive people who don’t know they need forgiveness. Forgive people who aren’t sorry. *And St. Paul tells us that God forgives those who don’t realize their need of forgiveness.* “God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.” In other words, everybody is disobedient to a greater or lesser extent.

All of us are. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and the wages of sin are death. But God has imprisoned all in disobedience in order that he might have mercy on all. *It's easier to forgive if the person you want to forgive is sorry, but we need to forgive even those who are not sorry.* If I understand the Gospel correctly, it's God's unconditional forgiveness of us that leads us to repentance and faith. It's only because God first forgives us that we come to be sorry for our sins. And when we forgive the impenitent, they're sometimes enabled to express sincere sorrow.

Thirdly, it's a little easier to forgive if we can see God's providence working, despite the hurts we've experienced. Joseph was able to forgive because he saw God's hand at work despite his brothers' sin. His brothers meant what they did for evil but God turned it into something good. Their sin led eventually to Joseph's position of power and glory. Their sin eventually led Joseph to the place where he was able to help and save his brothers. Just as our sin in putting Jesus on the cross leads, eventually to our forgiveness and salvation. If we are able to see how God has used what we have suffered at the hands of others to bring about some greater good it's easier for us forgive. *4 - It's easier if we can see our faults & sins...*

So forgiveness is never easy. Forgiveness takes time. It's easier to forgive someone who is sorry. And it's easier to forgive somebody if we can see God's hand at work to bring out good things from the evil we have suffered. All of us stand in need of forgiveness. All of need to forgive.

Somebody in your family is waiting to be forgiven by you. Somebody is waiting to forgive you. An article appeared years ago in a newspaper. A woman wrote: *When I was a little girl I was very close to her father. We had a wonderful relationship.* The times that I knew it best was at family celebrations. After the big family meal somebody would open up the old Victrola and put on records. My favorite was "The Beer Barrel Polka." Whenever somebody put that record on my dad would come over with open arms and say, "I believe this dance is ours. Let's dance those blues away." And we'd dance. My dad and I. *But my relationship with my dad began to change as I got older and longed for independence.* I remember very clearly how I was home

one summer from college. I was about 19 years old. I was at one of those special family celebrations, a birthday or anniversary or something. After dinner somebody got out the records. They put on the Beer Barrel Polka. Dad came over smiling with his arms outstretched and said, "This is our song. Let's dance." And for some inexplicable reason I slapped him. "Leave me alone. Don't touch me. Get away from me." Startled and terribly hurt he turned and he never invaded my privacy again. He danced with my mother and my sisters. But not with me. I'd come home late from a date and my dad would be sitting in his easy chair, wrapped in his bathrobe, half asleep, a book in his lap. I'd say, "What are you doing up. Why don't you go to bed." He'd look up with said eyes and say, "I was just waiting for you." All through college we had a very formal relationship, my dad and I. After college I was glad to leave home. But then I began to miss him. I didn't know how to bridge the gap. Then I was home again for one of those family celebrations. After dinner someone put on the Beer Barrel Polka. I walked over to dad and said, "I believe this is our dance." He turned and smiled and said, "I've been waiting for you. I've been waiting so long."

Someone is waiting for you to dance with them again. Someone is waiting for you to forgive them. Someone is waiting to forgive you.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, come into our hearts with your life giving Holy Spirit and help us to want to forgive family members who have hurt us. Help us to want to be forgiven by family member. Amen.