

TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

Doing What's Right Even When Life Treats You Wrong

“How to Develop a Lifestyle of Forgiveness ”

Genesis 45:1-15

We are most like beasts when we kill.

We are most like men when we judge.

We are most like God when we forgive.

Nothing in this world bears the imprint of God's presence in our lives more than when we openly display the grace and gift of forgiveness.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes this in his best-selling book *“When Bad Things Happen To Good People.”* *“The ability to forgive and the ability to love are the weapons God has given us to live fully, bravely, and meaningfully in this less-than-perfect world.”*

For the past six weeks we have been looking very carefully at the life of the Old Testament character **Joseph** in a series of sermons that I've entitled **Taking The High Road – Doing What's Right Even When Life Treats You Wrong**. There are all kinds of valuable lessons we can learn from the life of Joseph, such as:

- How to Deal with Shattered Dreams
- How to Resist the Lure of Sexual Temptation
- How to Maintain Your Integrity in a Crooked and Cruel World
- How to Trust God Even in the Midst of Dark and Dismal Days
- How to Leave a Legacy of Grace

But perhaps his greatest contribution to our spiritual growth and development centers around this matter of *forgiveness*. He shows us from his own life: **How To Develop A Lifestyle Of Forgiveness**.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once reminded us that *“forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is an attitude.”* It is a lifestyle. It is a way of life. It is a way of living and behaving and relating. Joseph was sinned against most of his life. People mistreated him. Even those closest to him betrayed him and hurt him.

- **He was mistreated by his family.** His brothers hated him and abused him.
- **He was mistreated by society.** He became a victim of human trafficking—was sold into slavery.
- **He was mistreated at work.** Although he was a model employee—honest, hardworking, competent—someone lied about him, and instead of checking out the rumor, his boss just canned him and had him thrown into jail.
- **He was mistreated by his friends.** He helped a friend who was deeply troubled and depressed. He was there for him. But when this friend finally got all of the broken pieces of his life put back together, he just forgot about Joseph, deserted him, abandoned him.

But here's the thing about Joseph. This is why his story is still being and talked about 4000 years later. He didn't strike back. He didn't retaliate. He didn't mistreat those who had mistreated him. He didn't get bitter. He didn't get nasty. He didn't get mean. He didn't carry a grudge. He didn't question God. He didn't plunge into the sea of pity. He didn't pull people aside and say, *“Hey! Let me tell you what they did to me.”*

Even when he had the golden opportunity to turn the tables on those who had mistreated him get his revenge—do to them what they had done to him—he took the high road and extended to them forgiveness, compassion, mercy, grace.

His legacy was a legacy of grace. After all of this mistreatment, after all of this heartache, after all of this suffering and sorrow, God blessed Joseph with two sons. *Do you know what he named them?* He named the oldest one **Manasseh**. *Do you know what that word “Manasseh” means?* It means *“to cause to forget.”* He said, *“This is the reason I'm naming my son Manasseh. It is because God has made me forget all of my trouble”* (Genesis 41:51 NIV).

He named his second son **Ephraim**. *Any idea what the name “Ephraim” means?* It means *“fruitful.”* Here's what Joseph said. *“I have named this second son Ephraim because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering”* (Genesis 41:52 NIV). Instead of walking around with a scowl on his face and a chip on his shoulder and bitter thoughts on his mind, he is just full of gratitude and appreciation and thanksgiving.

That's the fruit of a lifestyle of forgiveness. Someone has said it like this: ***"To forgive is to set a prisoner free...and you discover that the prisoner was you."***

When you are wronged, when you are mistreated, when you are sinned against, there are at least three ways in which you can respond.

You can respond in an emotional kind of way. You can become so upset over the wrong treatment, so upset over the injury, so upset over what someone has done to you that it is the only thing you can think about. It becomes like a gigantic funnel in your life into which all of your thoughts and feelings and emotions and energies are drained.

You roll it over in your mind again and again and again. You replay it. You relive it. You think of all the things you would like to say or do to that person who has wronged you.

You would never actually attack them verbally or physically but oh the vengeful, abusive thoughts that run rampant through your mind. We can get so wrapped up with all of these thoughts of retribution that we think of little else. They consume us!

But let me remind you...evil thoughts are like poison to the soul. It's a slow form of suicide. The Bible says as a man ***"thinketh in his heart, so is he"*** (Proverbs 23:7 KJV).

Now you can respond in a physical kind of way. You can actually do something to that person who has wronged you. You can verbally tell them off or even physically attack them. The newspapers are full of these kinds of attacks. But you know and I know that violence is never the answer.

You can never "win" by trying to even the score. **Ghandi** was right. If we all tried to live by ***"an eye for an eye"*** the whole world would be blind. Revenge is a great deceiver. It looks so sweet but in reality is so, so bitter.

There is, however, a third way in which you can respond. You can respond in a spiritual kind of way. Listen to what the Bible says in **Romans 12:19**. ***"Dear friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God, for He has said that He will repay those who deserve it"*** (LB).

Forgiveness is not an emotion—it is a decision. We do not excuse the evil; we do not tolerate it; we do not smother it or ignore it. We look the evil full in the face, call it what it is, let its horror shock and stun and enrage us. And then we choose, with God's help and in his strength, to forgive it.

The Bible says in **Colossians 3:13**, ***"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you"*** (NIV).

That's how Joseph lived his life. He literally "clothed himself with compassion." Let me show you what I mean from Scripture. Please take your Bibles and turn to the **45th chapter of Genesis**.

Let me set the background for you just a bit. Joseph—because of his godliness and his integrity, because he has taken the high road in life—has been blessed by God and put in a place where God could use him to be an instrument of salvation not just for his family but for a whole race of people.

Pharaoh has put Joseph in charge of the whole land of Egypt. He's the Number Two guy in the whole country and he's in charge of Egypt's economy during a time of famine. Anyone and everyone has to go through Joseph to get assistance during this time of national hunger and starvation.

So **Jacob**, Joseph's father whom he hasn't seen for years and years and years (since the time his brothers had sold him into slavery) sends his eleven sons (the ones who had sold Joseph into slavery) to Egypt to seek for some help and assistance during this awful time of famine.

And although Joseph recognizes them, they don't recognize him. That's where we pick up the story – verse 1.

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.

And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians hear him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. 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.

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! 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."

"For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."

"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. 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.'"

"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. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and who belong to you will become destitute."

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

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 45:1-15 NIV

Wow! What a beautiful picture of forgiveness. Not long before she died back in 1988, in a moment of surprising candor on television, one of the best-known atheists and secular humanists of our day, novelist **Marghanita Laski**, said, "*What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness. I have nobody to forgive me.*"

Forgiveness begets forgiveness. God forgives us. Then we can forgive ourselves. So we forgive others. And, more times than not, they in turn forgive us. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*" (Matthew 6:12 NKJV).

Forgiveness begets forgiveness. When you dare to forgive someone who has wronged you or hurt you or sinned against you, it literally sets into motion a powerful spiritual force that is immeasurably more than all we could ever imagine.

Someone has said it like this: "*Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.*"

So how do you develop a lifestyle of forgiveness? Let me give you a very simple three-point answer that flows right out of the life and experience of Joseph.

It Begins With A Choice. You and I have to choose to forgive. When someone hurts or wrongs us or sins against us, we have to choose: *Will I respond in an emotional kind of way? Will I respond in a physical kind of way? Or will I respond in a spiritual kind of way?*

I'm always reminded of how **King Louis XII** of France treated his enemies after he ascended to the throne. Before coming to power, he had been thrown into prison by his enemies and kept in chains and shackles. Later, when he was rescued from this captivity and made king, his friends and advisors urged him to get his revenge and repay his enemies for all of the evil they had done to him.

And so he prepared a scroll on which he listed one-by-one the names of all of those who perpetrated crimes against him and behind every man's name he placed a cross in red ink.

When his enemies heard about this they were terrified. They all went into hiding. They just assumed that this red cross placed beside their names meant certain death and bloodshed.

But when King Louis heard about their fear and panic, he said, ***“They have misunderstood. The cross which I drew beside each name was not a sign of punishment but a pledge of forgiveness which I have committed to them for the sake of the crucified Savior who, upon His cross, forgave His enemies and prayed for them.”***

He chose to forgive. Joseph chose to forgive. He could have responded in an emotional way. He could have responded in a physical way. But he chose to respond in a spiritual way. ***“He threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept...and he kissed all his brothers and wept over them”*** (Genesis 45:14-15 NIV).

Forgiveness begins with a choice. There's an old Chinese proverb that says, ***“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”*** *How do you develop a lifestyle of forgiveness?* You begin with a single step. You begin with a choice. You begin right now. *Who is it that desperately needs your forgiveness?* ***“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”***

It Is Powered Through Prayer. Listen again to Joseph's testimony in **Genesis 41:51.** ***“Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, ‘It is because God has made me forget all my trouble’*** (NIV). *God has made me forget all my trouble. God!*

You don't have the strength and the power within you to muster up the gift of forgiveness. It goes against everything in our human nature. *Do you remember what Jesus said one time to His disciples when they tried to cast out a demonic spirit that was holding a young boy captive but were powerless to be able to do it?* He said, ***“This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting”*** (Matthew 17:21 NKJV).

There are some things in our lives that we just don't have the power to do. It can only be accomplished through Jesus Christ and through His power and through prayer and fasting.

Perhaps you're sitting here this morning and thinking, ***“I can't forgive them. I can't forgive them. I've tried.”*** *Do you remember what the apostle Paul said on one occasion? “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (Philippians 4:13 NKJV).

Joseph said, ***“God has made me forget.”*** I can guarantee you he spent a lot of time talking with God through prayer.

It Is Sustained Through Faith. Joseph clung to the belief that God's hand was at work in all of this horrible “stuff” to somehow work for ***“the good of those love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”***

He said to his brothers, ***“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 NIV). Joseph has this gut-level faith that believed that God was big enough to take even the awful things life, the sinful things that have been done to us, and use them for good.

And so Joseph didn't feel like he had to go through life “keeping books.” ***“Well this person did me wrong and that person did me wrong and that person did me wrong.”*** He just committed all that to God. He let God keep the books and he just sought to live every day with faith and integrity.

He didn't let how other people acted set the standard for how he would act. He trusted in the power and providence of God.

There is a story that comes to us from India about a holy man who was bathing one day in a swollen river that had flooded. As he was bathing, a scorpion happened to float by. When the holy man saw the scorpion and realized that it would probably die, he picked it up in his hand to rescue it but the scorpion bit him with his poisonous fangs and the holy man had to fling it back into the water.

Unmindful of the bite, the holy man picked up the scorpion a second time to save it from death and the scorpion bit him again. This happened three times. A passerby who witnessed this little drama in the water said to the holy man, ***“Why are you trying to help that scorpion? He has bitten you three times! That’s his nature.”***

The holy man replied, ***“Yes, that is his nature and he is unable to let go of this habit of biting, but my nature is to help and forgive and I just can’t let go of my nature of helping and forgiving.”***

Now that doesn’t mean that God expects you to just open yourself up to someone who just abuses you and abuses you and abuses you; but I believe it does mean that a person who develops a lifestyle of forgiveness will not concentrate on the results of the acts of another but will remain concentrated on the end goal of his or her life to be like Jesus.

Joseph developed a lifestyle of forgiveness and that’s what God wants from you and from me. **Peter** says to Jesus, ***“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”***

Jesus answers, ***“I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven”*** (Matthew 18:21-22 NKJV). Or, in other words, never put a limit on forgiveness but let it literally become the ongoing spirit by which you live your life.