



THE TWO FACES OF FORGIVENESS

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Genesis 50:15-21

David Horn

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Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 4:31-5:2, NIV)

In the opening words of Ephesians 4:31, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice," the apostle Paul identifies the symptoms of failure to forgive. They are "*bitterness*" (being harsh, difficult to accept or admit, exhibiting strong animosity; active hatred); "*rage*" (violent, resentful); "*anger*" (extreme displeasure, hostility, indignation; anger aroused from unjust actions, exasperation towards someone); "*brawling*" (stubborn or unreasonably persistent complaining); "*slander*" (statements that injure the reputation or well-being of others); "*malice*" (the desire to harm others and to see them suffer; ill will, spite).

I don't know if you consider yourself one who forgives easily, but I certainly thought I was. When I studied this text from Ephesians years ago, I viewed it to be rather like a physician's manual. It starts by identifying the symptoms ("bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice") in order to make a proper diagnosis. Then it identifies the cause of the illness (failure to forgive each other). It made perfect intellectual sense, so I filed it away.

But since then God has shown me that forgiveness goes much deeper than that. It's hard to diagnose our own illness and recognize that we ourselves are in need of restoration. I had never considered unwillingness to forgive to be a particular problem for me. My relationships seemed to be in order. But then God called me to pay attention to the effects of an unforgiving attitude that I was harboring, one that was brought on through difficult times at work. Several years ago, the company I worked for underwent some dramatic changes during a time when it was about to be sold. As the climate at work became somewhat political, I had to deal with lies and accusations against me. The engineering staff I managed was reduced to one-third of its size, and thus my overall responsibilities were downgraded. I was angry about the injustice of the accusations and frustrated about the changes, but I responded as I thought I should by keeping my feelings to myself in the work place. Not being one who displays anger, I discussed my frustration with my wife and prayed about the confusing situation I found myself in.

About a year later we went on vacation to Hawaii. I was trying to have a good time and leave behind the frustration I felt at work. But one day an audible voice from the

Lord (spoken through my wife!) said, "you are bitter." She reminded me of these verses from Ephesians. As I thought through the definition of the symptoms, I had to agree with her. This text forced me to recognize that my bitterness was the fruit of an unforgiving heart. I was holding onto a sinful attitude toward my fellow workers. Furthermore, family concerns were taking a back seat, so consumed was I by my problems at work. Even my Hawaiian vacation wasn't fun.

As I examined why it took me so long to see the truth, I realized that my attitude toward and understanding of the term "forgiveness" was normal by man's standards. For example, I didn't yell at anyone. I just said, "I forgive you, now get out of my sight!" But, as I studied Ephesians 5:1, which says, "Be imitators of God," and looked at how God forgives, I saw that there were two definitions of forgiveness: Man's Forgiveness ("I forgive you, now get out of my sight"); and God's Forgiveness (forgive, forget the offense, and work to rebuild the relationship).

The passage we will be looking at today, Genesis 50:15-21, illustrates the truth of this passage in Ephesians. This text from the opening book of the Old Testament contrasts the forgiveness of man with forgiveness based on a mature relationship with God. Genesis 50:15:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph should bear a grudge against us and pay us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!"

Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, and he displayed his affection for this special son by giving him a coat of leadership and royalty. Joseph's brothers grew to resent their father's adoration of him, and in time, resentment became hatred. They planned to kill Joseph, but decided instead to sell him into slavery. Joseph faced many trials as a slave. He was falsely accused of a crime and thrown into prison. So it is not surprising that in this scene from Genesis 50, Joseph's brothers were fearful that they were about to be repaid. The Joseph they knew would seek revenge. Wouldn't you?

But this was not the first encounter between Joseph and his brothers following their selling him into slavery. They had already met. Look at Genesis 45:

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 heard 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.

Joseph had already extended forgiveness to his brothers, before the encounter in Genesis 50. During all the years of his captivity and exile, he had continually turned to God despite the abuse, temptation and loneliness he suffered.

When Joseph first identified himself to his brothers, they were terror-stricken, as we would expect. They feared his ability to exact punishment for their offenses against him. If you were Joseph, how would you have responded to your brothers? Would you have sought to avenge yourself? Would it have been pay-back time? Or would you have severed your relationships and never receive them again? Perhaps you would have extended forgiveness to them, granting them mercy and have them live in your debt forever, but only after they had fully acknowledged their wrongdoing. Perhaps you would have forgiven them and told them to get lost.

But Joseph had matured through the many trials he had suffered. His intimate and mature relationship with God is demonstrated in the testimony of his own words. He recognized that God had preserved and blessed him through difficult and demanding circumstances. He had learned to depend on God and he had learned to model God in his life. When Pharaoh placed him in charge of all Egypt, giving him geographical control, financial authority, social weight, royal standing, political power and a religious position, Joseph did not succumb to pride and write a self-help book, but rather continued to be dependent to God.

So Joseph had already reassured his brothers of his love and forgiveness, telling them that through their actions, God’s plan for his people was carried out.

Continuing with the story of this first encounter in Genesis 45, Joseph tells his brothers that he had plans to provide for them in the future. Verses 9-13:

“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 all 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.”

It would appear that the relationship had been healed. Genesis 45:14-15:

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.

But, as we have seen from our text, Genesis 50:15, there is still considerable tension in the relationship between Joseph and his brothers even after twenty years have passed. “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘What if Joseph should bear a grudge against us and pay us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!’” This was how they felt, even though Joseph had moved Jacob and his household from the land of Canaan, given them food to protect them from the famine and land to establish them in Egypt, where Joseph could care for them and rebuild his relationship with them. But the death of Jacob changed the delicate balance. It rekindled the shame and guilt they had been harboring because of their own actions.

In the next section we will get a clearer understanding of what had been going on in their hearts during all the years that Joseph had been loving them and providing for them. Genesis 50:16-17 exposes their guilt and their mistrust of his forgiveness:

So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father charged before he died, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph, “Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.”’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.”

Recognize what was motivating Joseph’s brothers. In their minds, their guilt outweighed the possibility of his forgiving them. Their problem lay in the fact that Joseph, in untypical human fashion, had not sought to exact payment from them for their evil deeds. He was not carrying the baggage of bitterness and anger that accompanies an unforgiving attitude. All those years they had mistrusted his pledge to care for them and their descendants, and his obvious demonstration of love for them. They felt he was merely keeping the peace for their father’s sake. So when their defense was gone they feared that at last they were going to have to pay for their actions — retribution they knew was deserved. We would expect no less.

Joseph’s brothers expected nothing better than man’s forgiveness — a forgiveness that is finite in time, self-serving, and self-gratifying. But the forgiveness that Joseph extended was heavenly forgiveness — a forgiveness for all time, one that is God-serving and God-pleasing.

So in their request to Joseph following the death of Jacob, the brothers were asking for forgiveness and access to a relationship that had already been made available and demonstrated to them. Joseph had extended to them complete forgiveness, only to be mistrusted. In this exchange it is clear that they thought Joseph’s forgiveness was shallow and that it contained personal motives (keeping the peace as a front while their father was still alive).

Joseph’s response is not surprising. His heart was broken with sadness and disappointment at his brothers’ attempt to deceive and at their apparent feeling that they needed to protect themselves from his expected punishment.

Extending godly love and forgiveness doesn’t mean you will receive earthly understanding or appreciation. These

are often rewarded with mistrust and tension, because they are not based on earthly reasoning. God's forgiveness is heavenly; it does not come from this world.

Joseph's brothers recognize the hurt their comments have caused. And at last they realize that he was sincere in his forgiveness and in the love he had demonstrated to them. Genesis 50:18-20:

Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."

Here we have four key aspects of God's forgiveness, and Joseph's application of them to his relationship with his brothers. The first aspect of forgiveness is a refusal to exact a debt owed because of a wrong done.

I define forgiveness as "the act of setting someone free from a debt to you that is the result of a wrong done against you." To the Jew, the penalty for sin, for disobedience against God, was death — being removed from a relationship with God. The Jews made sacrifices to God as a reminder of their sin, not because they believed that sacrifice was sufficient payment for their sin; only God could provide that payment. There was nothing they could do to add value to the offering. They looked forward to the day when God would provide the sacrifice that was worthy for the total payment once and for all time for their sin and rebellion against him.

I believe Joseph modeled this by testifying that judgment and payment for sin comes from God. Joseph did not have authority from God to make things even. He relinquished his earthly desire to control, to exact justice and get even, in favor of God's plan. He knew that God was in control. This is quite a statement for a man of immense power who knew that he had his abusers at his mercy. But Joseph demonstrated this forgiveness not only in his words, but in his actions.

My first reaction to being wronged is to set the record straight. I make every effort not to be misunderstood. But when the misunderstanding is not resolved, I tend to bury my frustration rather than accept the fact that other plans, things that are not yet apparent, are in the process of being worked out. I have come to realize that the root of my weakness lies in my not trusting God. What I am called to do is respond to situations by being obedient to God, to rid my heart of anger, not to promote my authority and defend myself.

So the first aspect of forgiveness is a refusal to exact a debt owed because of a wrong done.

The second is, forgetting what is owed. This is what Joseph did. Let's look at our text, Genesis 50:21:

"So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones."

The second aspect of God's forgiveness is that he forgets the debt. I will define "forgetting the debt" as "no longer seeking to retrieve the debt owed to you resulting from a wrong done against you." Scripture has a lot to say about the extent of this aspect of forgiveness, because God wants us to have total assurance of it. For example, Isaiah 38:17

says, "Lo, for my own welfare I had great bitterness; It is Thou who hast kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, For Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back." And Isaiah 43:25 says, "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins."

What wonderful news this is! God completely removes our sin. He never punishes or associates the sin with the character of the person in a negative or rejecting way. Joseph's ill feelings towards his brothers were eliminated, as we see, in the context of God's greater plan — "God meant it for good in order..." The offense against Joseph was great, but his experience, maturity and dependence on God enabled him to see that through his hardship, the nation would be preserved. Not only does Joseph pledge his love to his brothers, as he did in chapter 45, but he pledges to care for them and their families and households through the generations.

When my relationships are strained but interaction is mandatory, I tend to say "I forgive," submerging any temptation I feel toward anger or revenge. But all this does is foster bitterness, which hardens my heart. My interaction with my "offenders" is always affected as a result. I find it hard to relax when I am with them. They have done me wrong, and I keep a mental balance sheet, available for recall at a moment's notice, to measure the debt that is due to me. But God does not keep lists of our wrongdoing against him. It was the same with Joseph. He did not keep a list of his brothers' wrongs.

The third aspect of God's forgiveness is rebuilding the relationship. The text says, "Joseph comforted them (reassured them) and spoke kindly to them." God pursues us in order to develop a personal relationship with us. He has provided a way of redemption (Christ's sacrifice for the removal of sin for all time), so that we can spend an eternity with him. This has been his desire since Adam's sin of disobedience — to rebuild the relationship broken by rebellion and sin. For his part, Joseph made every effort to rebuild his personal relationship with his brothers.

When I am having problems with people whom I have to get along with, I tend to say "I forgive," then I develop an uncaring, highly controlled, "working relationship" — a relationship of convenience — with them. If I have strained relationships with people whom I need not interact with, I tend to say "I forgive you, now get out of my life." But this passage in Ephesians challenges me to measure the level of my desire for intimacy in relationships as a barometer of possible hidden bitterness towards others. In the same way that an alcoholic tries to convince himself that he can manage one social drink, I have found that I am good at suppressing anger and bitterness to a socially acceptable level. But if I am to be an imitator of God, I continually need to be aware of occasions when I am harboring anger. God cannot tolerate sin. We should do no less. We should not settle for a socially acceptable, manageable level of failure to forgive others.

The fourth aspect of God's forgiveness is that he freely extends it. God's plan is in place because he loved us, as 1 John 4:19 says, "We love, because He first loved us." This aspect is clearly recorded for us by Luke in his account of Christ's words of forgiveness toward his executioners. Luke 23:33-35: "When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—

one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.'" We can see this model in Joseph's forgiveness in both chapters 45 and 50. He had already forgiven his brothers, releasing them from their responsibilities for his suffering, before they were reunited with him or had asked him for forgiveness.

In his words on the cross, Christ was not requiring repentance or even recognition of wrong actions before offering forgiveness. Like Joseph's brothers, forgiveness has been extended to us, but we must give up our pride (which requires acknowledging our sin), relinquish control, and trust in God's plan. These two factors are also at the heart of our ability to forgive others. Trust in God is demonstrated by not demanding our rights to exact justice, especially when we are clearly right. These are hard words. They convict me, because I often fail to live the life that I am describing.

So how do we start loving others again, nurturing a life that demonstrates God's forgiveness? Let's look once more at the passage from Ephesians. These verses list not only the symptoms of the illness ("bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice"), its cause (failure to forgive each other), and a restoration plan ("Be imitators of God"), they also offer the remedy: "*Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.*" The

place to start is to recognize that we are dearly loved children of God. Recognize to what degree God has forgiven you. If you have never experienced this love, how can you possibly imitate it or extend it to others? Although we often fail, we should pray that we will continue to mature as children of our loving Father, just as Joseph and Jesus were both secure in the Father's love.

Now that we have contrasted man's and God's forgiveness, where are you in your relationships with others? Will you imitate God, eradicating all accumulated bitterness and anger in your relationships? Will you go all the way when you are wronged, forgiving and forgetting the debt and looking for opportunities to rebuild the damaged relationship without requiring the offending person's acknowledgment of any wrongdoing? Remember that God's forgiveness is available to us because Jesus has paid the price. Hebrews 10:15-18 says: "And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws upon their heart, and upon their mind I will write them,' He then says, 'And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.' Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (NASB).

Will you let God be your Lord? Will you accept his love unconditionally and trust his wisdom in all areas of your life? Or will you continue to react against those who have wronged you, guided by your desire to achieve emotional satisfaction through getting even?

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