

Sept. 14, 2014 – Genesis 50:15-21 (Epistle: Romans 14:1-12 Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35)

*Remember how great is God's forgiveness.*

- *Don't take it for granted.*
- *Don't disbelieve it.*

What is the worst thing anyone has ever done to you? Many years ago a close friend said some things that were meant to be helpful but they actually hurt me a lot. It was difficult to forgive him and forget the things he said. Perhaps you have experienced something similar.

But has a friend or relative ever actually planned to kill you? That is what Joseph, the son of Jacob, experienced when he was seventeen years old (see Genesis 37). Joseph wasn't completely innocent. He was his father's favorite and didn't seem to hid that fact. He brought a "bad report" about his brothers to his father. He wore the special tunic his father had given him in front of his brothers, provoking them to jealousy and hatred. And he shared a couple dreams that he had with them in which they all bowed down to him; this caused them to hate him even more.

So they decided to kill him. They grabbed him, stripped off his precious tunic and threw him in a pit. While they were eating, they saw a caravan of traders passing by and decided to sell Joseph to them. At least they would get something out of their brother. The traders took Joseph down to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh.

Potiphar's wife tried over and over to seduce him, and when he wouldn't give in, she accused him of trying to rape her. He was thrown into prison (see Genesis 39). Thirteen years later he was finally released when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream and Pharaoh made him second in charge of all Egypt so he could store up food in the seven good years that were coming for the seven years of famine that would follow (see Genesis 41).

After the first years of famine, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy food (see Genesis 42-44). They didn't recognize him and he spoke to them through an interpreter. On their second visit, Joseph finally revealed himself to them and then they, along with Jacob, their father, moved to Egypt with their families (see Genesis 45-46).

Our Old Testament reading picks up seventeen years after Joseph's family had moved to Egypt. After their father's death, Joseph's brothers were worried that he would finally take revenge, so they sent a message to him saying that their father asked that he would forgive them for their sins.

This exchange shows us how important forgiveness is. It warns us not to take it for granted and also not to disbelieve it.

Joseph's brothers had sinned against him and did evil to him. Yet Joseph forgave them for wanting to kill him and for selling him into slavery and imprisonment for thirteen years. He forgave them not because of the message his brother's sent, but because of what God had done for Joseph. As great as Joseph's forgiveness was, it pales in comparison to God's forgiveness to us.

Think how much God has forgiven you. We fail to do the good that God wants us to do and we do things God does not want us to do. And don't forget your thoughts. God sees our hearts as well and tells us that our thoughts can be just as sinful as our actions. If you committed just one sin a day, over a life of eighty years that would be almost thirty thousand sins. God tells us that even one sin brings death.

The good news is that Jesus has taken them all upon Himself. He suffered and died on the cross to take your sins away and pay for them. He rose again on the third day so that in Him you have the forgiveness of sins.

When it comes to God's forgiveness, we can fall into two opposite errors: we can take it for granted, and we can have trouble believing it.

Because we hear about God's forgiveness and Jesus death and resurrection so much, and live in God's grace, the good news can become old news. We can take it for granted.

When life becomes difficult, we complain, even complain to God! We seem to think that we deserve better, that God should bless us more – even more than He already has. He has forgiven all our sins, now life should be easy, right?

Just because God is with you doesn't mean that everything will go the way you think it should. The brothers meant evil against Joseph, but God meant it for good. When Potiphar's wife continually asked Joseph to sleep with her, he had done the right thing. He had refused her advances and even told her: "*How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?*" (Genesis 39:9). But he still went to prison for thirteen years after she falsely accused him of trying to rape her. The Lord blessed his faithfulness in prison so that he was put in charge of all the prisoners, but he was still in prison. The butler that he had helped forgot about him and left him in prison until Pharaoh had his dreams and the butler remembered that Joseph had accurately interpreted the his own dream in prison.

People sometimes complain that they don't get what they deserve. Maybe you have said something similar to that. Dilbert, a comic character by Scott Adams, once said, "I ask for so little... and boy do I get it!"

But when you think about what you do deserve from God because of your sins, do you still want to get it? Psalm 103 (10-12) reminds us: "*He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.*"

Because God's forgiveness is so great, we don't get what we deserve, and we praise Him for that! Even though we are forgiven, God doesn't promise us an easy life. He does, however, promise that all things will work out for our good (Romans 8:28).

A second way we take God's forgiveness for granted is by presuming upon it and using it even as an "excuse" to sin. The devil and our sinful flesh twist God's forgiveness and tempt us to sin with the thought: "God will forgive you, so go ahead. It doesn't really matter."

God addressed this attitude in the beginning of Romans chapter 6: "*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?*" Through Jesus we not only have the forgiveness of our sins, but through baptism we were buried with Him into death, so that we have died to sin and it no longer has power over us. We were raised with Him to "*walk in newness of life*" (Romans 6:3-4). So don't misuse God's forgiveness as an excuse to sin, but remember all that God has done for you in Christ, so that through the Spirit you can put to death your sinful flesh and tell Satan to get behind you.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus warns us about a third way that we can take God's forgiveness for granted: by being unforgiving to others. The servant in His parable was forgiven a huge sum of money but then refused to forgive the much, much smaller debt his fellow servant owed him.

The story sounds almost ridiculous. But have you ever had trouble forgiving someone, or have you ever held grudge? When you compare all the things God has forgiven you to what someone has done to you, there is really no comparison. If you have trouble forgiving someone, remember how great is God's forgiveness to you. Because God has forgiven you so much, you can forgive others.

Instead of taking God's forgiveness for granted, we can fall into the opposite error of not believing it. We see this demonstrated in Joseph's brothers. After living under Joseph's care and protection for seventeen years, they didn't believe that Joseph had really forgiven them. They thought their father's presence was the only thing keeping him from exacting vengeance. Even though he had told them when he first revealed himself to them, "*Do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life*" (Genesis 45:5) – but still they didn't believe he could forgive them.

God's forgiveness is so great, it really is unbelievable! Because of Jesus' death in your place on the cross and His resurrection from the dead all your sins are forgiven! But the accuser comes to us and whispers, "Are they really? Even that thing you did...?" Satan wants us to doubt God's word: "Did God really say...?" and to doubt God's forgiveness.

Is there a sin that haunts you – one that you have trouble believing that God has really forgiven? Sometimes we have trouble forgiving ourselves for something we have done. But know that even so God has had mercy upon you and has forgiven even that sin through Jesus Christ. 1 John 3:20 tells us, "*If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.*" God knows all that you have done and will ever do, but He still sent His Son to be the sacrifice for your sins.

Another way we show a lack of faith in God's forgiveness is when we have idea that we must somehow do something to earn God's forgiveness or to make up for our sin. Our natural mind tells us that we must do more than turn to God and confess our sins, that we also have to do some sort of penance. We see that attitude here in Joseph's brothers. They came to Joseph and said, "*Behold, we are your servants.*" They offered their servitude in exchange for forgiveness.

But Joseph had already forgiven them. And God has already forgiven you in Christ. There is nothing we can do to make up for our sin, and there is nothing we need to do because Jesus has done it all. God reassures us in 1 John 1:9, "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" Jesus has paid for your sins, and not yours only, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

Our circumstances can also lead us to doubt God's forgiveness. When you experience difficulties in life it may be tempting to think that God is punishing you for something that you have done – or failed to do. This, too, shows how difficult it is to believe in God's forgiveness.

But God has forgiven you, and these difficulties are not a punishment for your sin. Jesus has already redeemed you and paid the full price for your sin by His death. There is no further payment needed.

God does not promise, however, that we will be delivered from every earthly consequence of our sin. If you drink and drive, God won't prevent you from being pulled over and being arrested or losing your license. If that happens, however, it does not mean that God has not forgiven you, because He has.

The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us that we should not become discouraged when we face difficulties, as if we have fallen out of favor with God. On the contrary, such times show that God is dealing with us as His beloved children. He quotes from Proverbs 3:11-12: "*My son,*

*do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.”* He goes on to say, *“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”* (Hebrews 12:11). God uses these difficult times to discipline us as our loving Father and to help us grow in our faith and trust in Him.

So do not let difficulties lead you to doubt God’s forgiveness, but remember how great it is! The world and the devil may mean evil against you, but God means it for good. Verse 21 was spoken by Joseph to his brothers, but it is the same thing that God says to you: *“Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you.”*

So remember how great is God’s forgiveness in Christ. Don’t take it for granted so that you excuse your sin, but remember how much God has forgiven you so that you can forgive others. And don’t disbelieve God’s forgiveness. God has forgiven all your sins, no matter what they may be, even if you have trouble forgiving yourself.

May God grant this to us all. Amen.

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