

"From Grudge to Grace"

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August 20, 2017

¹Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there: since there are five more years of famine to come — so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here."

¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. (Genesis 45:1-15)

When I hear this story, my primary question is this: how in the world does Joseph ***not*** hold a grudge?

If you don't remember the plot of Joseph's story, let me refresh your memory. As a boy, Joseph had been sent out to check on his older brothers as they tended the flocks, which they took as an opportunity to rid themselves of this pest of a brother, the tattle-tale, parental favorite that they resented so much. These brothers certainly held a grudge about the favoritism and braggadocio. They wanted to kill Joseph, but they ultimately decide to throw him a desert pit instead. Then, feeling guilty, they decide it would be better to haul him out and sell him into slavery. So, Joseph is carried off as a slave to Egypt. When he gets in trouble with his master Potiphar, he even does some jail time. Nevertheless, Joseph eventually rises up through the ranks, earning favor with hard work, smarts and a penchant for interpreting dreams. Joseph makes his way, but he is dealt a series of cruel and unfair blows, all of which began with the betrayal and violence of his brothers. Joseph has every reason to be angry, every reason to hold a grudge.

Even after Joseph reveals his identity to them, the brothers know very well that he has reason to hold a grudge against them. They state it openly, at least to one another. In Genesis 50, after they have gone back to Canaan with Joseph to bury their father, they are still worrying about what Joseph really thinks of them. They are asking "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" (Gen. 50:15)

Many of us have a complicated relationship with the wrongs that we feel have been done to us. They challenge our sense of justice and fairness. We remember the hurt they inflicted upon us.

We know it is not healthy to hold onto grudges, but if we are not careful they can become cemented in our spirits, where they drop anchor and keep us moored in old, festering emotional wounds.

Against this very human tendency, scripture gives us some clear advice. Leviticus 19:18 says "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*" Ephesians 4:31-32 suggests that we "*Put away... all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*" And then there's the Romans 12 text we read a few minutes ago, "*Repay no one evil for evil...*" Let me just draw all of these together by adding one wrinkle: "OK, well, easier said than done."

Jack Redhead, the renowned preacher of First Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, once told a helpful story about this kind of resentment. "In the home where I grew up," he said, "there were three brothers close enough together in age to always be getting in one another's hair." He said that their code was not as much "I am my brother's keeper" as it was "I am my brother's tormentor." During the day one of the brothers had pulled a prank on another one, and for the rest of the afternoon his victim was clearly plotting his revenge. Over dinner that night, their very godly grandmother, who lived with them, passed the plate of biscuits to the scheming brother. "Son, she said, "instead of paying him back, butter his biscuit for him. That way, you will heap coals of fire on his head."

In that moment, Redhead's grandmother was quoting both Proverbs and Paul. Both texts say, in so many words, that treating an enemy with kindness "heaps burning coals on their heads."¹ But Redhead doesn't remember the story because of his grandmother's biblical knowledge. She knew the Bible like the back of her hand, so quoting it was not anything particularly unique. He remembers the story because, in that day, most families still cooked over a wood stove, and right after the grandmother offered her biblical advice, the family maid emerged from the kitchen holding a small shovel full of glowing red coals from the oven, and she stood right behind the prankster brother with the smoking, red-hot heap within inches of his head. Redhead never said whether he was the prankster brother, the plotting brother, or the third bystander brother. He simply said that the image was seared into his brain forever.²

It has always seemed a little odd to me, this teaching that kindness is really just a good way to get back at someone you hate. It just seems like another kind of vengeance, perhaps even a more sinister kind that clothes a wolf of anger in a disguise of sheep's clothing. Most of the commentators who try to make sense of this tension have said that it is not really about condemnation -- that it just represents the kindling of a warmer reaction in the offender's heart. That is certainly Redhead's take on those scriptures, that when we respond to a wrong with kindness, the wrongdoer will feel ashamed, that our loving, gracious response "will burn like a fire to awaken his conscience," that it "will lead him to repentance," that this "kind of revenge will get rid of your enemy by turning him into a friend."³

I certainly follow the spirit of this interpretation, and I have nothing but respect for Redhead, but it is not what I see in Joseph. Joseph seems to be looking for more traditional vengeance... at least at first. When he initially recognizes his brothers, Joseph does not greet them with kindness. He treats them like strangers. He speaks harshly to them.⁴ He accuses them of spying and throws them in jail. Later, he even frames them for larceny. Generally speaking, he toys with them like a

¹ Proverbs 25:21-22; Romans 12:20

² John A. Redhead, "How Can I Get Rid of Resentment?" in *Putting Your Faith to Work* (New York: Abingdon, 1959), 62-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴ Genesis 42:7

hungry cat that's got a terrified mouse by the tail. This is a guy who is nursing a grudge, and it's payback time.

And then we get to our reading this morning, and we find that Joseph cannot sustain his grudge. In his case, love proves to be stronger than hate, and grace wins out over vengeance. For centuries, the church has used this moment in Joseph's life, which is clearly his finest hour, to make him out to be an Old Testament pattern for Christ. The famous 19th century pastor Charles Spurgeon, for example, preached this idea with great passion, noting the many similarities between them: that Joseph was sold out by his brothers for twenty pieces of silver, while Christ was sold out by his brother Judas for thirty... that Joseph's temptation in Potiphar's house mirrored Jesus' temptation in the wilderness... that both suffered greatly but were later exalted to sit at the right hand of the ultimate authority... that, just like Christ, Joseph wielded the power of life and death over his sinning brothers, that he would have been justified in punishing them, but that he chose instead to act with grace and love and receive them once again as family.⁵ It makes for a pretty solid sermon.

But it is also clear, I believe, that Joseph is no Jesus. The spirit of Joseph is much more mixed and conflicted. In his heart, it is not clear that love will win out. It is not a foregone conclusion that grace will prevail. Having been betrayed, assaulted, and condemned by his own family, life eventually hands Joseph a shovelful of coals -- and he seems to be a lot more like us in his debate over how he wants to use it.

It is the very same debate that I expect is now consuming the family of Heather Heyer, the woman who was tragically killed a week ago Saturday in Charlottesville. Heather's parents have to feel like they have been thrown into a deep well of despair that they did not deserve and that they are bearing the brunt of a great injustice. They are angry and devastated at the loss of their daughter. And if ever there was cause to hold a grudge, they have it.

It is clear, however, that the admonitions of scripture are already helping to shape their response. At her memorial service, Heather Heyer's father tearfully offered these words:

"She loved people, she wanted equality. And in this issue, on the day of her passing, she wanted to put down hate. And for my part, we just need to stop all this stuff and just forgive each other. I think that's what the Lord would want us to do is to stop — just love one another."⁶

Her mother, however, came at the issue from a different place. "It's not all about forgiveness," she said. "The truth is, we are going to have our differences, we are going to be angry with each other. But let's channel that anger not into hate."⁷

These are just two people, two perspectives, in a complex situation that has uncovered a vast array of grudges -- grudges over old wars; old slights; old prejudices; old injustices; old wounds that continue to cause pain. In fact, I would argue that most of us in this room, as we continue to confront the things that Charlottesville has uncovered in our country and in ourselves, are wrestling over some kind of grudge. Part of us wants to forgive and move on, because that is what the Lord would want us to do, while another part wants to hold onto some of the anger or some of the pain -- to somehow keep it alive in the slim hope that it might help an injustice to be overcome.

The late historian and novelist Charles Flood, in his book on Robert E. Lee called *The Last Years*, shared a story from the general's life as a civilian after the Civil War. He had accepted an invitation to dinner from a wealthy Kentucky family who lived not far from his home. Before

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, "Joseph and His Brethren," delivered May 11, 1862, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0449.htm>

⁶ <http://people.com/politics/heather-heyer-father-fights-tears-speaking-at-memorial-service/>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/us/charlottesville-heather-heyer-memorial-mother.html?mcubz=3>

dinner, the matriarch of the family gave him a tour of the grounds. The tour ended at the remains of a grand old tree that clearly held great sentimental value to her. The tree had seen better days. Most of its branches were broken; it had few leaves. It was so badly damaged, Lee thought, that it seemed a miracle it was still alive. The woman began to cry as she described how the spreading canopy of this once great tree had been battered relentlessly by Union artillery during the war. Her tears quickly turned angry as she related the injustice to Lee.

It became immediately clear what she wanted from him. She wanted Lee to sympathize with her plight, to confirm her fury, and to share in her condemnation of the enemy. She wanted Lee to help her dump the red hot coals of her resentment on the heads of those evil people who had done this to her. Instead, Lee just looked at the tree, gently turned to her, and quietly said, "Cut it down, my dear madam, and forget it."⁸

Joseph was not Christ, any more than you or I are. But I do have to hand it to Joseph, for when life gave him a shovelful of hot coals, he ultimately resisted the impulse to dump them out on the people who had hurt him. Even though he had been handed the makings of a world-class grudge, he allowed his spirit to be guided by a greater Light.

As we remember him today, I hope we will be brave enough to confront the broken trees in our own lives -- those monuments that we have erected in our own hearts to keep old wounds alive.⁹

May we, too, recognize the ways that we are holding onto the past in unhealthy ways.

May we, too, have the wisdom to recognize that some old trees are not worth saving, that all they just serve to sustain painful memories and perpetuate bad feelings.

But most importantly, may we, too, hear the story of Joseph, a man like us, and be reminded of a much greater story, a much greater love, a much greater grace, and a much greater ending that has never been in doubt. May we be eternally thankful and grateful that our Lord, despite all that we have done to betray and wound him, has never -- and will never -- hold a grudge against us.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

⁸ Mike Riley, "Cut It Down And Forget It," <http://gewatkins.net/cut-it-down-and-forget-it/>

⁹"I, too, have often chosen to turn scarred remnants in my own heart into monuments that perpetually remind me all over again. For many of us it is time to follow the words of Robert E. Lee: Let's cut it down, my dear brothers and sisters, and forget it." Ron Corzine, "Cut It Down and Forget It..." <http://scopenewsletter.com/illustrations/cut-it-down-and-forget-it/>