

“Taking the High Road Relationally”

Genesis 45:1-15

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Today we are going to pick up where Phillip left off with the story of Joseph and his brothers. Last week Phillip had us thinking about who is our brother – our sister – that person whom we know in our heart we are to walk beside, help through life, and love. Joseph’s father had told him to go and check on his ten older brothers, who were pasturing the family’s flocks wherever they could find grassy land. He was to find them, walk beside them, make sure they were alright.

But when they saw him coming, they didn’t say, “Oh, great, Joseph is coming to check on our well-being.” No, instead they said, “Great! This is our chance to kill that boy!” They hated Joseph because he was his dad’s favorite. And not only that – Joseph had also shared some dreams with them in which they were bowing down to him. What arrogance! That spoiled, over-indulged trouble-maker! They would rather **kill** him than **bow down** to him, and now that he was out of the sight of his father’s adoring eye, they finally had the chance to act out their hateful feelings toward him.

The oldest brother, Reuben, was against this plan, however, and convinced the others to simply throw Joseph into a deep pit instead of killing him outright. So they did. Joseph fought and begged for his life, but the brothers overpowered him, and threw him into the pit. And then they sat down to a nice meal. I’m not making this up – read Genesis chapter 37 if you don’t know or remember this story!

Can you imagine this scenario? Doesn’t this sound like the cold-hearted murderers you hear about on today’s news? They carry out an act that would make a normal person sick to their stomach to even think about, and instead, the activity makes them hungry! And *then* while the brothers were filling their stomachs, they looked up and noticed a caravan of foreign traders passing by, and they got an even greater idea – they said, (Gen 37:26) “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” So they sold their brother for twenty pieces of silver. They felt good about the deal, because they were not only free from the guilt they would have had had they killed their brother, but they were also able to benefit financially by getting rid of him this way. This was a perfect win-lose situation. Which is good, right? As long as you’re in the “winning” position?

You may be thinking, “Um, wait a minute, that doesn’t sound quite right.” But how often don’t we take care of, or walk along side of, our brother and sister in ways that serve our best interests and pay little or no attention to theirs? Don’t we often make decisions according to what works best for us, rather than according to what is most God-centered, ethical, or just? Think about the last time you said “no” to somebody’s request for help. Why did you say “no”? Was it because to do so was in your best interest? Did you say “no” because you would rather spend your time, energy, and resources on something else? Or did you say “no” because that was in the best interests of the other person? Did you say “no” because you had prayed about the request and believed that God was leading you in other directions?

We all have been guilty of serving our own best interest at the expense of the one we are to care for and protect. And most if not all of us have also been on the other side of that behavior – we have been the **victim** of a person who was watching out only for themselves, at our expense. How many of us have been victims in a divorce situation in which a spouse or parent was focused on their needs or their anger to the exclusion of everyone else’s needs and vulnerabilities? Or perhaps you have lost your job because that served the best interests of the company, despite it not serving *your* interests in any positive way?

Yes, these are typical behaviors of dysfunctional people, and the Bible is as full of examples as is our society! Or should I say, “as is our families?!” And most of the time when we are in the middle of our dysfunctional behavior, the last thing we think about is the long-term consequences of our actions! Joseph’s

brothers thought only of relieving themselves of their annoying brother. They did not think about the fact that they would have to forever live with their father's unrelenting grief, which was painfully unbearable for even the most self-centered brother. Or that the father's feelings of favor for Joseph would be transferred to baby brother Benjamin, the other son of father's favorite wife. This is what happens in "win-lose" situations. We may feel relieved to get rid of the immediate distressful situation, but we end up being forever affected by the unexpected consequences. "Win-lose" situations always cost us, regardless of what side of that equation we are on. Joseph's brothers learned that the hard way.

And Joseph had every right to live the rest of his life feeling like a victim. But he didn't. Even though he had plenty of other opportunities to pick up the victim role, like when his boss' wife got him thrown into the dungeon for years because he acted with integrity instead of caving into her desire for him. But with every opportunity to pick up the victim role, he chose to take the high road relationally. Lots of times doing so cost him – one might say he was frequently on the unfortunate end of the "win-lose" equation, and yet he saw God at work in his life. The Bible explains this by saying, "The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love, and gave him favor."

And indeed, people saw Joseph's ability, positive energy and outlook, and they put him in jobs of responsibility wherever he was, be it in prison or working for political leaders. We really shouldn't be surprised by this; people are attracted to those who take the high road relationally. And after many years of ups and downs, his spiritual gift of dream interpretation led him to a position second only to the Pharaoh himself. During a time of extended famine, he was in charge of food distribution for the entire country of Egypt.

If you don't know the story, I encourage you to read it – it's in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, second half of the book. Long story short, Joseph's brothers were starving, they heard there was food in Egypt, so they went there to buy food, only to come face to face with Joseph, whom they did not recognize, this being many years after having sold him into slavery. He recognized them, though, and tested their honesty and integrity. And he found that the years had softened them, and their having to live with a father in perpetual grief caused them to realize the value of family. Joseph became convinced that his brothers had changed, so he decided to make himself known to them. Let's pick up this story at chapter 45, verse 1: (READ)

Joseph was finally in the "win" position. He could have repeated the "win-lose" equation his family and many of our families practice daily. He could have killed his brothers, or perhaps more justly, thrown them in into a pit or prison for the rest of their lives. But he didn't. He also did not ignore or deny the sinful behavior of his brothers. He named the elephant in the room, in other words. But he reframed it – he said that though his brothers intended to *take* life, GOD intended to *preserve* life, and did so through Joseph. Joseph could have understood his life as a series of tragedies and unjust behavior toward him – instead he chose to focus on the ways in which God was at work *despite* the sinful behavior of others, and indeed, *in the midst of* the sinful behavior of others.

Is that what you've done? Is that how you've interpreted your life? Where is your focus – on what do you spend the most time? Do you spend a significant energy thinking about and wallowing in thoughts of how others have mistreated you? Do you then excuse your current choices on the past sinful mistreatment of others? How long are you going to give others that power over your life? You might be able to point back to the sinful behavior of others as clearly as could Joseph. But where does that get you? If Joseph had wallowed in his victimhood, he would have ignored every opportunity God had available to him, and would have made nothing of his life. But he chose the high road relationally, and God calls you and me to do the same. He calls us to see *Him* in our lives, not to focus on the sin of others. How about it? Are you ready to see the opportunities and possibilities of each day? Are you ready to put all the yuk of your past behind, *leave* it in the past, and move on to all that God has for you? Let's pray that we may have eyes to see and hearts to discern the ways in which the Lord is with us, showing us steadfast love, and granting us favor.

Lord, call to mind those areas in our lives that blind us to your presence and work in our lives.

What relationship or event negatively affects us?

What past sin holds us bondage?

Help us to understand how hanging onto those thoughts only hurts us.

Lord, we ask that you take this burden from us – you can carry it better than we do. Help us to trust you with it – trust you to deal with it with justice. You know what that means.

Lord, enable us to stop being stuck in the past, to stop giving power to those things and people who have hurt us.

Help us to live in the present – because YOU are in the present – you are here with us today.

And though WE may be hindered by/paralyzed by pas sin, YOU aren't. You are still at work. Still fulfilling your purposes in the world, still wanting to fulfill your dreams and purposes in us.

Open our eyes that we may see you clearly, our ears that we may hear you more fully, and our hearts that we may follow you more deeply. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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