

The Joyful Pain of Forgiving

1. Warm up: We humans can be difficult and cantankerous. When we get hurt, it's easy to go down the rabbit hole of grievance, bitterness, and paybacks, kinda like classic sometimes villains do. Who's your favorite classic villain from film, theater, or TV?
2. Instead of paybacks, the Bible calls us to forgive.
 - a. In Matthew 18:21, Simon Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?" Jesus replies, "Not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven." What do you think that means?
 - b. Ephesians 4:32 says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Be imitators of God, as dear children." What does it mean to forgive "as God in Christ forgave us"?
3. Again and again and again the Bible tells us to forgive. But forgiving is counterintuitive, hard, and painful. So why should we do it, especially if the other person doesn't deserve it? We often tend to think forgiving is for the benefit of the offender. It's not, as illustrated by Esau in this week's Bible story. By now you know the basic plotline. Jacob had cheated and swindled Esau to the point Esau decided to murder him. Jacob fled and lived in exile for 20 years. As we pick up the story this week, Jacob longs for home and decides to take the risk of returning. Messengers tell Jacob that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob assumes the worst and spends the night wrestling with God in prayer. As the sun rises the next morning, Jacob rises to await his fate. Read Genesis 33:1-11, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. When Jacob looks up and sees Esau coming with 400 men, what do you imagine he thought and felt?
 - b. When Esau ran to greet him, kissed him, and wept, what do you imagine Jacob thought and felt?
 - c. Think of a time when someone showed great grace in forgiving you. What happened? How did it feel to be forgiven?
 - d. Note what Jacob says to Esau in verse 10, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God since you have received me with such favor." What do you think he meant? How was Jacob's encounter with Esau like an encounter with God?
4. From Esau's example, Jeff drew three key reasons why we should push through the painful process of forgiving those who hurt us. **Reason #1 – Forgiving frees me to live well!**

- a. Scientific studies have documented that people who don't forgive experience higher levels of blood pressure, show more signs of bodily stress, sleep less well, and even jump less high. Why do you think that is?
 - b. Ron McMannis says, "Bitterness is like drinking poison then waiting for the other person to die." Think of a time when you were stewing and bitter about something someone did to you. How would you describe what your body felt like during that time? How would you describe what your spirit felt like?
 - c. Esau could have spent the 20 years Jacob was in exile stewing and obsessing and being bitter about all his brother had taken from him and how much more he would have had but for what his brother. Instead Esau's attitude was, "I have enough." Genesis 33:9. Instead of obsessing about what somebody had done to him, he chose to let that go and focus on all he did have. That prompted Jeff to say, "Nobody can take the sweetness of life away from you except you." Do you agree or disagree – and why?
 - d. Jeff told a story about his family's dispute with their neighbors to illustrate how much better life became when they forgave. Tell us about a time in your life when forgiving someone made your life noticeably better. Better how?
5. **Reason #2 – Forgiving is an incredibly generative act.** "Generative" means the power to make good things happen in the world, to create new life or progress. Forgiving doesn't just bless us, it has ripple effects on the people around us and in our world. If Esau had ordered his 400 men to kill Jacob and his family, there would have been no Israel, no Hebrew Bible, no prophets, no Jesus. In one act of vengeance, Esau could have done unimaginable harm to the world. Instead by forgiving, he gave us Israel, Jesus, and the Bible. That's what you call "generative."
- a. Why do you think forgiving is so generative?
 - b. Think about people you've known (or known of) who have been forgiven, then gone on to do wonderful things in the world. Who are you thinking of? What did they go on to do? What might have happened if they had not been forgiven?
6. **Reason #3 – Forgiving brings me closer to the heart of God than anything else.** The cross of Jesus Christ was the most pivotal experience of his life – and it was all about forgiveness. The cross was harrowing and painful, but he did so we and his executioners could be forgiven. Nothing brings us closer to the heart of God than when we re-live, in our own little way, what Jesus experienced on the cross by going through the painful process of forgiving someone.
- a. Is there someone in your life right now that you're struggling to forgive? Tell us about them.
 - b. In your own experience, why is forgiving so hard?
 - c. In your own experience, what helps you to forgive?

Genesis 33:1-11

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ²He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." ⁶Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; ⁷Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. ⁸Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." ⁹But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself."

¹⁰Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. ¹¹Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want." So he urged him, and he took it.