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As I said last week, the Old Testament doesn't really have many teachings about interpersonal forgiveness. Instead, it tells stories – and that's probably even better. There are a number of stories in the Old Testament that serve as sort of case studies of how forgiveness plays out between people, and we'll be looking at more of those in the coming weeks. Stories can be better than straightforward teachings, because stories can include nuances and subtleties that any list of rules can't, and one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament is the saga of the first king of Israel, Saul, his son Jonathan, and the young upstart David. If you've never done it before, I highly recommend that you read the entire first book of Samuel. It almost reads like a novel, and the emotions and feelings that Saul, Jonathan and David experience are exactly the same as what we know in our lives. It makes all three of them sympathetic in a way that many other more lofty Bible figures sometimes are not.

Saul was the first king of Israel, but God was reluctant to anoint a king in the first place. Saul did well in the beginning, and things looked good for him and his heir, Jonathan. But then came the Philistine threat, and no one would stand up to the mighty Goliath but a little shepherd boy named David. At first Saul was thrilled by his new champion. We might today diagnose Saul with bipolar disorder, though, because he had terrible mood swings. He took David into his home and had David sing and play the harp to him to soothe him in one of his bad moods. He treated David tenderly and with great favor. But Saul was not the only one who was fond of David. His own son was too. The Bible poignantly says, "The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul." Jonathan gave his own clothes, his own armor and weapons to David, and David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him. But David's success made Saul jealous of him. At one point when David was playing his harp for Saul, Saul threw a spear at him and tried to kill him. Jonathan would intervene, trying to talk his father out of his anger, but when that didn't work, he went to David and helped him to escape. David fled to the hills and gathered up a vagabond army. Now he and Saul seem poised on the brink of a war, and here is where we find ourselves in the 24th chapter.

Saul pauses in his pursuit of David to enter a cave for a pit stop. Unbeknownst to him, David and his men are hiding in the back of a cave. David's men urge him to kill Saul while he has the chance, and David creeps up to Saul and cuts off the hem of his cloak. Afterwards he runs up to Saul and says, "Why do you listen to the people who tell you I'm out to get you? See, I was so close to you that I cut off the hem of your cloak, but I would never harm you!" His words penetrate Saul's suspicion, and the king cries out, "Is that your voice, my son David?" And for a brief moment the two are reconciled. But Saul goes back to his palace while David and his men return to the hills. Indeed, all is not restored to harmony. The exact same scene will play out again in another chapter, and finally Saul would be killed in battle – but by the Philistines, and not by David or his men.

I picked this story because it shows how David remains faithful to Saul, how he tries to forgive and be reconciled with Saul – but as in my own personal story, Saul turns right around and keeps hurting David anyway, would even kill him if he could. The story gives us some ideas of what forgiveness is, and just as importantly, what it is not. Forgiveness is *not* forgetting. David remembers all too well that Saul will turn against him in a heartbeat. It is *not* absolution. David does not excuse or justify the wrongs Saul has done to him. Indeed, he calls upon God to vindicate him against Saul. Nor is

forgiveness reconciliation. At the end of this scene, they each return to their own homes. David did not put himself into a position where Saul could easily harm him again or kill him.

Those three issues are perhaps the most common stumbling blocks as we wrestle with forgiveness in our lives. We think that if we can't forget what happened, then we must not have really forgiven. We think that to forgive means we somehow lessen or even excuse the wrong that was done to us, and this violates our sense of justice and fairness. And finally, we all too often think that forgiving means we have restored our relationship with the person who harmed us. That was the big stumbling block in my own situation. If I forgave her, shouldn't that mean we would be friends again? Yet I knew, like David, that she would do the same thing to me over and over again. Did forgiveness mean constantly exposing myself to the harm she would do to me?

The answer is a resounding *NO*. All the books I read agreed firmly on this point, and it seems obvious to me now, but at the time I thought proper forgiveness would always end in reconciliation. Now, however, I have learned that forgiveness and reconciliation are two entirely different things, and while reconciliation cannot happen without forgiveness, forgiveness does not have to lead to reconciliation in order to be complete. This is crucial to understanding how forgiveness works, what it is and what it is not, because many of the arguments used *against* forgiveness stem from a misunderstanding of what forgiveness is. Some arguments against forgiveness include the charge that it denies the seriousness of the offense, that it lets people off the hook, that it fails to address legitimate issues of justice and fairness, and that it places too much of a burden on the victim, who has already suffered and now is expected to bless the wrongdoer.

But we see in the story of David and Saul that David's forgiveness means none of those things. He reminds Saul of the wrong he did, he calls upon God for vindication, he refuses to put himself in harm's way by reconciling with Saul. In fact, forgiveness is not really about the wrongdoer at all. Every book on this subject that I read agreed: forgiveness is done for the benefit of the one who was wronged. One of my books put it this way, "The opposite of forgiveness is bitterness." When we are wronged, we carry that injury with us. Over time it can fester and become infected to the point where it poisons all aspects of our lives. If we are able to forgive, then we can move on. It frees us from being bound to that injury. It says that the person who wronged us will no longer be allowed to dominate our lives. When we are able to forgive, then we move away from the role of helpless victim and become empowered to be the heroes of our own story.

Again we see this illustrated in the story of David and Saul. David refused to let the wrong Saul had done cause him to do wrong himself. "Who am I," he said to himself, "to raise my hand against the Lord's anointed?" Regicide is a pretty serious crime, and however much David might have felt justified in seeking revenge, if he had killed Israel's king it would have thrown the budding nation into chaos, and it would have severely tainted his own reputation and more importantly his soul. So he stepped back and instead offered forgiveness. And let's be honest, as you hear this story, which of the two seems the most honorable and admirable? David, of course. His gesture toward Saul does not make him seem weak. On the contrary, it makes him the hero.

Forgiveness makes you powerful, and that is why it can never be coerced from one who was wronged. Attempts to coerce forgiveness, to make a person forgive, only further victimizes that person. It becomes one more imposition forced upon them by someone else. Forgiveness always remains the *privilege* of the victim, and cannot be an obligation. From a spiritual perspective then, our prayer that God will forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us – we see how God's forgiveness of us has freed us to change and become better people. In a similar way, then, our forgiveness of

others frees us from being victims and puts us in touch with true power, the ability to rise above the cycle of violence, hatred, and revenge, to employ a power that can turn enemies into friends.

But as I said, reconciliation does not always follow when forgiveness is offered. Indeed, this is a long-standing theological conundrum for Christianity. God offers forgiveness to all, but not all of us are willing to receive it. Can we, in other words, refuse grace? Can we refuse the salvation God offers us? Yes, we certainly can refuse it. And so it is among us here on earth. Forgiveness is a gift, but reconciliation, atonement – these are the burdens and obligations of the wrongdoers.

The goal of the wrongdoer is not to seek forgiveness, because only victims can offer that out of their own free will. Rather, the goal of wrongdoers is to apologize for the wrong they have done, to atone for it and offer redress insofar as it is possible. This is where public apologies for crimes against humanity come in. We'll talk about this more in a future sermon, but this past week you may have heard how the prime minister of Australia apologized to aboriginal Australians for the role the government has played in trying to destroy their cultural identity, particularly through the practice of taking aborigine children away from their families to be raised by whites. The prime minister cannot ask for forgiveness for this. But he can name the wrong that was done, apologize for it, and offer some kind of redress, whether in the form of direct compensation offered to those who were harmed, or in some other way benefiting aborigines in general.

Of course, some would say that taking revenge also empowers the victim. And so we see made-for-TV movies in which the abused wife or child murders the abuser. Far be it from me to pass judgment on anyone who is driven so far due to abuse and humiliation, but we can see how such deeds create further problems. As the therapists in the books I read pointed out, resentment and revenge are quite simply not the best way to heal pain, and certainly not to heal those relationships that can be healed. Forgiveness is far more effective in achieving that purpose. Through forgiveness, we are able to release our anger and resentment. We are able to free ourselves from the pain caused by that injury. We no longer define ourselves in terms of being a victim, but rather empower ourselves to become the heroes of our own story.

But how exactly do we achieve these amazing things? That will be the subject of our sermon next week!