

August 23, 2009
Doing What Is Right... Right?
Genesis 39

More and more I am finding my ethics and moral standards at odds with those in society at large. Perhaps I'm changing. Maybe, as a father of teenage children, I'm very sensitive to the cultural norms around me. Certainly societal standards are changing: what was once unthinkable is now commonplace. How do we respond as God's people? As followers of Jesus? Should we just 'get with the times'? How we live wisely, well - and faithfully as God's people - in these troubled times. Lets take another look at Joseph.

Flashback: Handling tough times

Last week we met Joseph. He, like mighty Casey of Mudville baseball fame, had struck out. All his prospects for comfort, health, wealth and security as his well-off father's favoured son, were gone. He was sold by his jealous brothers into slavery. He had every right to grumble and be VERY angry. He would be justified in working sullenly, reluctantly and with as bad an attitude as it is humanely possible. Perhaps he should try to sabotage the Egyptian "machine." Maybe he should try to escape. Working as a slave was more than just unpleasant, unrewarding, and demeaning - it was a horrid, nasty, futureless existence. In the U.S. it is supposedly possible to go from a "log house to the White House" (a reference to Abraham Lincoln) - Joseph had gone from the White House to no house, being a slave on the cotton plantations in the old South. He was no longer a person - he was property - cheap, disposable property at that. How would you feel? How would you act? Have your hopes and dreams ever been totally demolished, replaced with a nightmare? Can you even begin to comprehend Joseph's experience and emotions?

Let's look at Joseph. He "found favour" in the eyes of his owner, Potiphar. Think about that: how would a slave "find favour" in his master's sight? Not by having bad attitude! Not by dragging himself through his duties. Not by sabotage. Not trying to escape. He would be hard working. He would have a positive attitude. He would go above and beyond the bare minimum expected. He would be completely trustworthy. In short, he would take on the challenge of his new life with gusto. Somehow he would take on the life-he-never-wanted with enthusiasm and a positive attitude. As a consequence, Potiphar gave him more and more opportunity, responsibility, and a better lot in life. The Lord was looking out for Joseph - even in the most horrid of circumstances. God blessed Joseph. But Joseph attitude mattered, too. How did Joseph handle adversity? He took it as a new challenge and made the most of it.

Last week we began thinking about how we handle things when life falls apart. It is easy to become bitter, angry, and resentful. It is easy to lash out. But Joseph shows us a different way - a better way - a nobler way - a godly way of handling adversity. Make the most of it! Attack it with a positive attitude. The Lord is looking out for us - even in the most horrid of circumstances. He will provide for us. He will provide for our needs. If God can bless a slave in ancient Egypt, He can bless us - in our circumstances - too! But our attitude makes a huge

difference, too. Hold to your principles. Live without compromise. Do more than expected.

Moving Ahead: Temptation

Joseph's life was decent - about as decent as it gets for a slave. Then something happened ... Joseph was "*well-built and handsome*": Potiphar's wife noticed. She noticed the handsome young man and she made some blatant advances towards him. If Joseph were to respond to her overtures, his standard of living might improve even more (until Potiphar found out, anyway).

Moral standards in ancient Egypt were at least as relaxed as contemporary Western culture. It was common for men to have several wives and a host of mistresses all living under the same roof. Women in Egypt were actually more "liberated" than in most cultures; they could have several male partners as well (just ask Cleopatra!).

The ethic of an exclusive monogamous male-female life long marriage commitment is really a distinctive development, unique to later Judaism and Christianity. Most ancient cultures (including the early Old Testament Jews) had no problem with a man having several wives and cavorting with prostitutes and other women besides (check out David and Solomon). Certainly the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians had few of the taboos which we place on sexual promiscuity.

It is within Christianity that the understanding of marriage as an exclusive, life-long union of one man and one woman. Why? God teaches us that each and every person is precious to God, created in His holy image. Each and every life is precious to Him. Through marriage you demonstrate your love to your spouse by letting him/her know that he/she is the incredibly precious. Through faithful marriage you demonstrate your complete, undivided, intimate love. Your spouse holds a unique place in your life that no one else has. In a selfless, self-giving way you "*forsake all others and cleave only unto him/her.*" That kind of love is complete. It is unqualified. It is unconditional. It is everlasting. It is a mirror reflection of God's love for you.

"Husbands, love your wives," writes Paul, *"as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"* (Ephesians 5:25). That is a distinctively Christian view of marriage. It is a very, very challenging perspective on marriage. It is hard - very hard - the most difficult approach to marriage in any culture or faith. You will find it nowhere else. But as Christians we teach it because it values people as God values us. It expresses the sacrificial love that Jesus gave to us. Yes, it is difficult. But with God's help, and with the strength, comfort, and guidance of the Holy Spirit we can do it.

We shouldn't be surprised that in a society where God is virtually forgotten, many people have given up on this approach to marriage. If you don't believe in a God who creates people - precious and valuable - in His image, if you don't believe in Jesus and His supreme model of self-giving love, if you don't believe in a Holy Spirit who empowers us to do things that are impossible in our own strength, then a view of marriage as a life-long, sacrificial commitment of one man and one woman is not important. It is relatively easy to be unfaithful in our commitments and to have multiple partners. But you miss the joy that comes from knowing you are loved - securely

and safely. And you miss that joy that comes from giving yourself, unconditionally, in love.

But if you do believe in a God who creates us, male and female in His precious image, if you do believe in a Saviour who models love, if you do believe in the Holy Spirit and His wisdom and power, you approach marriage as a holy institution, ordained by God. You understand its commitments to be sacred. This is relatively difficult. It requires self-discipline. It requires self-control. It requires self-sacrifice. But it also brings a deeper, richer experience of life.

Back to Joseph! As far as we know he is single with no prospects for marriage (this was not permitted for slaves). He is well-built and handsome young man, probably in his early twenties. A wealthy (and likely attractive) woman is making advances towards him. Her patronage and favour could pay off in all sorts of ways. *Get with the times, Joseph!* This is Egypt in 2009(???) BC! It's OK! Everyone is doing it! Potiphar likely has loads of other women; for all we know his wife has other men, too. Why shouldn't Joseph take advantage of the situation? This woman could make his life even better!

But Joseph wouldn't go there. He refused. Not once. Many times. Do you think he was tempted? Absolutely! Do you think he thought about the consequences of refusing? Undoubtedly! He knew very well that this lady had the power to provide even more rewards *or* to make his life a living nightmare. He knew that his continued refusals could result in a backlash of vengeance. But that was a price he was willing to pay.

And he paid it.

More bad things happened to a good person. It was precisely because he was a good person - because he was doing the right thing - that he was thrown into prison. From bad to worse - now he was languishing in a primitive Egyptian prison.

The Issue: To compromise or not to compromise

Joseph, with all his faults, was a man of principle and conviction. He knew Potiphar had trusted him with everything - except his wife. He was not willing to betray that trust, despite the consequences. He understood that whatever vows of commitment he had made to Potiphar were binding, complete, unqualified, unconditional, everlasting (a lot like marriage contract). He would not break that covenant come hell or high water ... or prison. To break his commitment to Potiphar would be to break faith with the God who expects us to honour our commitments (39:9).

The temptation was real. Yes, it was a temptation to a passionate affair. But it was also the temptation to wealth, power, and opportunity. With a little compromise, Joseph could go further, have more, and become the person of power and influence he was supposed to have been back home. There, as Jacob's favourite son, he would have been a big fish in a little pond. Here he had the opportunity to be a big fish in a big pond!

Get with the times, Joseph! Everyone is doing it! If you want to make it, that's what you have to

do. But Joseph wouldn't do it.

There were ethical and moral principles here he would not compromise.

Those ethical and moral principles came from his relationship with God. To compromise them would be to compromise his relationship with God. He wouldn't do it. He couldn't do it.

It cost Joseph, dearly. But we never, ever hear Joseph complain. In fact, in a worse situation than before, we find Joseph showing the same qualities of character that gave him favour in Potiphar's sight (hard-working? Conscientious? Pleasant? Trustworthy?) and he found favour in the jailor's sight!

Living Like Joseph

We live in a world as tempting as Joseph's. Our temptations may (or may not be) beautiful women or handsome men. Our temptations may (or may not be) wealth, financial security, or career advancement. Our temptations may (or may not be) all sort of things. The issue is not whether or not you are tempted by things that compromise your integrity before God - you are - but, first, do you know what your temptation(s) is? What is it that lures you to compromise your integrity? What is it that leads you away from God?

Second, how are you going to deal with that?

It's easy to say, *"Get with the times; everyone is doing it."*

It is right to say, *"How can I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"* (39:9). That will be hard to say. We can think of all sorts of good reasons not to say it. The price may be high - very high. But Joseph knows - as, deep down, we all know - that no price is too high to protect our integrity; no price is too high to keep our relationship with God strong, rich and meaningful.

When we compromise our convictions it DOES affect our relationship with God. We cannot pray honestly, when we live with the guilt of our sin. We cannot praise sincerely, when we know our lives are out of sync with God. We need to take the time, make the honest effort, do the hard work of confessing our sin before God - AND changing the way we live - in order to restore that relationship with Him. That's possible. But it takes commitment. Integrity. Change.

It's so much better just do what is right from the beginning. Right?

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