

The Silver Cup

Genesis 44:1 - 45:3

This passage isn't too hard to understand. Actually, it is pretty clear. But you might wonder how you should evaluate what Joseph did. After all, he seems to act pretty deceitfully, doesn't he? Specifically, the question is whether or not it was morally proper to put the silver cup in Benjamin's sack and then accuse him of stealing it. I am never one to condone deceitfulness, and I try to be consistent in rejecting any notion that the end justifies the means. So I have to give that question a lot of thought.

The conclusion of my own thinking is the realization that this was a test. The final part of the test which began in chapter 42, where Joseph had accused the brothers of being spies, and required them to go home and return with their youngest brother to prove their identity and the truthfulness of their story. And it is morally proper to give a test, for God tests us. Immorality enters in only when the purpose of the test is actually to cause temptation. Immorality occurs when you try to cause someone to stumble or to fail, wishing to provoke them to sin by attacking them at a particularly vulnerable point.

Many times, it is simply the motivation of the heart that distinguishes between a godly test and an evil temptation, for surely God uses the same circumstances sometimes as a godly test that Satan uses for a wicked temptation.

In this case, Joseph has already shown his compassion for his brothers, which we saw in the revealing moment described in Genesis 42:24, where we read that, "he turned himself away from them and wept. Then he returned to them again, and talked with them."

Joseph could hardly hold back his emotions, obviously wanting to be reconciled with his brothers. And so this test is not for the sake of his own vengeance, to inflict punishment upon his brothers for the evil they had done to him. Rather, it seems obvious that Joseph's intention is to be reconciled to them through their full repentance. That repentance would come only through their experience of being humbled, circumstances which God would use to compel them to freely admit their sin.

Joseph's test essentially was to accuse his brothers. First of being spies, in chapter 42. Then, in chapter 44, accusing Benjamin of stealing the silver cup. Such accusations were within Joseph's right as Pharaoh's chief administrator, and in fact, they were part of the conscientious fulfillment of his job. He was to be suspicious of all foreigners, compelling them all to prove the truthfulness of their identity.

Joseph didn't immediately reveal his identity. And he required his brothers to prove their identity. Then he compelled them to answer his accusation. Surely it would have been wrong for him to actually inflict punishment upon his brothers for something he knew they hadn't done, but he was free to accuse them so long as he gave them the due process of the law to defend themselves. And it was their defense which would most accurately reveal the nature of their hearts. So it is,

I. THE FINAL TEST.

Joseph had already heard his brothers confess their sin, at least to themselves, and that was the occasion which prompted him to leave the room in order to hold back his emotions.

Gen. 42:21 Then they said to one another, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us." 22 And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did

I not speak to you, saying, ‘Do not sin against the boy’; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us.” 23 But they did not know that Joseph understood them, for he spoke to them through an interpreter.”

Then, as we saw last week, Joseph gave his brothers a fine feast and sent them all back home with grain and food, since they had upheld their agreement to return to Egypt with Benjamin. But still there was no full expression of repentance. So Joseph institutes this final test. He accuses them of stealing.

v.1-5

The question was therefore proposed,

A. Would the brothers act self-righteously or admit their own sin?

How your respond to accusations does reveal a great deal of what is in the depth of your heart. Especially false accusations. Many people react very harshly, and even though the accusation might be false, they still reveal the bitterness and resentment hidden in their hearts. Many people react self-righteously, as if there is no sin in them at all. Some, those whose godliness has grown to maturity, respond humbly, even to a false accusation.

Actually, being falsely accused is a great blessing.

1 Peter 4:14 “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.”

So its a blessing to be falsely accused. Those who are self-

righteous have no such sense of that blessing. So what do we read about Joseph’s brothers?

v.6-8

Now, such a declaration of innocence is not self-righteous here, because of their humility to submit to any consequences of guilt. In declaring their innocence, they fully submit to the prescribed penalty.

v.9

And their sincerity is proven by their response when Joseph’s steward finds evidence of guilt, the silver cup, in Benjamin’s sack. It’s really quite an amazing response, one which reveals the godliness and the spiritual maturity of their hearts.

v.15-16

Confronted with evidence of guilt, they offer no explanation. “What can we say?” They offer no self-righteous justification, even in the face of what they must believe is mistaken evidence. “How can we clear ourselves?” They don’t even try.

Surely they believed Benjamin, in his innocence. They don’t accuse him nor rebuke him. But they don’t immediately think of themselves as the victims of a horrible deception, either. What do they say?

v.16 “God has found out the iniquity of your servants.”

You see, the false accusation actually provoked them to confess their guilt. Now, they weren’t guilty of stealing the silver cup. They knew that for a fact, despite the evidence to the contrary. But instead of defending themselves regarding the silver cup, they simply confess their other guilt, most certainly, their guilt of selling Joseph into slavery in the first place, the guilt they specifically acknowledged the first time they met Joseph in

Egypt.

And they realized that God had done it. They didn't argue about being framed for stealing. They just stood before Joseph as guilty sinners.

v.16 "God has found out the iniquity of your servants."

That's astounding. And that was the crux of this test. Surely the brothers passed the test with flying colors! They were now compelled to expose their own sin, deprived of all defenses and stripped of any remaining self-righteousness.

God will test us in order to reveal the nature of our hearts. That test might even come in the form of a false accusation. God is testing for self-righteousness. God is looking for the humility of a free and unfettered confession of sin. That's what Joseph's brothers demonstrate here.

The final test takes another, related form. And that is the test of the brothers' relationship to Benjamin. Remember, their original sin of selling Joseph into slavery was provoked by their jealousy and resentment of him. Joseph tests to see if any of that remains. And the question is,

B. Would the brothers forsake Benjamin?

Joseph designed the test to set apart Benjamin. And so his steward accepts the brothers' original offer,

v.10

Benjamin, of course, unknowingly, possessed the silver cup. And that was discovered.

v.11-12

The brothers now had an immediate choice. Would they

abandon Benjamin, forsake him into the hands of Pharaoh, and leave for home free men with all their grain? Were any resentment and jealousy left, they certainly would have. And they could justify it quite easily. It wouldn't be nearly as bad as when they actually sold Joseph into slavery.

Or would they remain loyal and faithful to their beloved brother? The answer is obvious. To a man, they stood by their brother. They all tore their clothes in the grief of the circumstances, and they went back to Egypt, to face Joseph as a united family.

v.13-14

They would, together, submit to the punishment of Pharaoh, and become his slaves. They would not forsake their brother.

v.16b "...here we are, my lord's slaves, both we and he also with whom the cup was found."

Joseph pushed the test one step further.

v.17

And still they refused. Surely, Benjamin was their beloved brother. There was no resentment or jealousy was left. The sin of their hearts which caused them to sell Joseph into slavery was gone. The final test was complete.

By God's grace, we need to learn to respond with the godly humility of Joseph's brothers. There are times when God may well test you in order to expose the sinfulness of your heart. When he does, whatever the circumstances, let Judah's example be your own.

v.16

With that, let's look more closely at Judah's response, for this is such a marvelous answer. One commentator writes about Judah that "this is one of the manliest, most straightforward speeches ever delivered by any man. For depth of feeling and sincerity of purpose it stands unexcelled."

Judah's speech before Pharaoh is,

II. THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF LOVE.

As we saw last week, Judah takes the lead as the spokesman.
v.18

In that verse, it is obvious that,

A. Judah shows deep respect for Pharaoh's authority.

Let me continue to emphasize that. Because of his humility, because of the absence of any self-righteousness, because of his awareness of his own guilt, he doesn't speak out of line even when falsely accused. Deep respect for authority is a telltale sign of genuine humility. Again, even when falsely accused!

But even more than that,

B. Judah displays deep honor for his father.

That is, I believe, his deepest motive. Notice how he reveals that honor for Jacob when he retells the sequence of events to Pharaoh. And notice how truthfully and accurately he tells them.
v.19-26

Notice how sympathetic he is to his father's grief.
v.27-29

And notice what he does with such sympathetic honor for his father.

v.30-32

Judah is no longer thinking of himself. He is thinking of his father, first and foremost. He is not concerned about his own welfare nor his own freedom, but solely about the comfort and consolation which he could offer to his father.

v.34

The selflessness of Judah's heart is fully revealed. With his interest in his father's well-being foremost in his mind, he makes an astounding offer. Perhaps the most Christ-like example of anyone in Scripture other than Christ himself.

v.33

C. Judah offers a complete self-sacrifice.

This is an absolutely indescribable offer.

v.33

Indeed, that is the ultimate expression of love. In Jesus' own words,

John15:12 "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

This is a challenge for all of us, isn't it—this willingness to offer a complete self-sacrifice? There are so many ways in which that might take place. For husbands, this is your chief obligation to your wife, to lay down your life for her. Not merely to assert authority over her, not to make sure that she submits to you, but to love her as Jesus loved his bride.

Eph. 5:29 "For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church."

Those words "nourishes and cherishes" are so vital. Few

husbands will ever have the occasion to literally lay down their life on behalf of their wife, though if you were, instinctually, I expect most men would rise to that occasion. But every day of your life you face an occasion to nourish and cherish your wife, and to do so means to deny yourself to some degree. Every day of your life you will have the opportunity to lay down your life for your wife. That is, to consider her needs more important than your own.

You will have that opportunity often within this church, as well. To consider the needs that other people have more important than your own life!

Joseph shows us the ultimate expression of love, the complete self-sacrifice of his very life for the sake of his brother and his father. Jesus, of course, showed us that ultimate expression of love on the cross, an expression of love we are called to imitate.

Mat. 16:24 “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

I chose to include the first three verses of chapter 45 this morning because they are the appropriate climax to this whole chapter, to the past several chapters. I didn’t want to leave you hanging. And I wanted to stress the nature of this good test which Joseph administered to his brothers. Again, the purpose of the test was not vindictiveness nor resentment. On the contrary, the purpose of the test, compelling his brothers to go home and return with Benjamin, accusing Benjamin of stealing the cup, the purpose of all of that was to bring about the spirit and attitude we have already seen in the brothers. And with that, to bring about what we find in chapter 45.

III. THE JOYFUL REUNION.

45:1-3

Joseph has been like a pressure valve reading to explode. He can only contain himself so much. He has suppressed those emotions for two years now, wanting nothing more than to be reconciled to his family. And to care for them freely and openly. Finally, with the genuine humility and repentance of his brothers, we see in Joseph,

A. The intensity of human love.

Joseph could no longer control himself. And the intensity was so powerful, and so personal, that he wanted to share it with only his brothers. So he asked every to leave, and he revealed himself to his own brothers.

v.1

Nothing is held back any longer. The tears are tears of joy, intense joy that has found such deep satisfaction in the love of his brothers.

v.2

This might be the most dramatic confrontation and reunion in all literature, but it was far more than that. For now, with this intensity of human love, with this joyful reunion, the nation of the children of Israel was born. The founding of that nation of God’s people whom he would deliver out of Egypt has taken place. The brothers are together. Twelve men, all sinners. All transformed by the powerful working of God’s grace.

All according to God’s eternal purpose and plan, for it was to these twelve brothers, to this nation of their descendants, that Jesus Christ would come and be born as a man. Notice also,

B. The tenderness of human love.

This was, with obvious implications, a very dramatic event. Even traumatic. The words “I am Joseph” would have struck his brothers like a lightning bolt. Their reaction is nearly indescribable, and the only Hebrew word used to describe it means to be greatly dismayed or even terrified. The word appropriately means to be confronted with something totally unexpected and totally shocking. To say the least, they were troubled, even speechless.

And Joseph, in his mature love, breaks the hardness of that moment by asking a tender question about his father.

v.3 “...does my father still live?”

Now, he knew the answer to that question, based on his previous dealings with his brothers. But now he asks the question as a brother. And it is so much more than merely, “Is he alive?” It’s the first question of family restoration. “How is he?” Indeed, the question would have begun a conversation which would have covered the past 22 years of separation.

Let me end by introducing next week’s sermon, which will emphasize how all of this served to further God’s sovereign purpose and plan, something which Joseph understood very well.

45:4-7

That great deliverance was, of course, accomplished under the leadership of Moses when Israel was delivered out of Egypt. But even that great deliverance was only a foreshadowing the true exodus of God’s true people, the deliverance from the slavery of sin which Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross of Calvary.

That deliverance is pictured for us this morning in this

sacrament, and having studied such a godly, human example of self-sacrifice in Judah, let us fix our eyes upon the lion of Judah, the great descendant of Judah, who has laid down his own life so that we might be forgiven of our sins. Jesus Christ. God has uncovered our guilt. And he has washed it away. And so, this morning, may we joyfully proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.