



Free and Undeified

Gen 45:1-15; Is 56:1-8; Mt 15:10-28; Romans 11:1-2, 29-32

It is easy to categorize people and write them off. It is simple to determine means time-honored those who are worthy of our time and attention and ignore all others. Is this the freedom to which we were called in Christ Jesus?

Jacob's actions went further than his own doings. He unwittingly passed on to his children a tendency to struggle among themselves for favor and advancement. They knew the stories of Jacob and Esau. They knew how one tricked the other and laid plans to take away privilege. They had done the same with Joseph, selling him off to Egypt as a slave.

Things did not go with Joseph as they had planned, however. God took their plans and made more of Joseph through these attempts to bring him harm than they could have devised on their best days. Famine had struck the region, and God had taken Joseph from prison to place him in Pharaoh's household as administrator of agricultural produce and welfare of the land. God had warned Pharaoh in dreams that Joseph interpreted, so as to be prepared for this famine. Now the brothers had come to purchase food in Egypt, the land into which they had sold their brother for a few pieces of silver and a better position in their father's eyes.

There is just something about our desire to eliminate the competition. That is what had been going on among Joseph's brothers and between Jacob and Esau, as well. If we could just get rid of the competition, we could all go to China and bring home more gold medals than Michael Phelps this week. We have to admit, however, we would not be setting many world records. Disqualify everyone else and enter me uncontested in the Olympics, but no one would be interested in watching me perform.

That's kind of how it was for the brothers. Joseph was out of the way, but Jacob did not look with more favor upon the others. He simply grieved for Joseph and clung harder to Benjamin. Now down in Egypt, they were surprised by finding Joseph in power and their future in his hands. The tables had turned and now their lives were in their brother's power.

I imagine there was a lot of soul-searching that day. There was a lot of review of how they had treated or mistreated Joseph. There were concerns that maybe they should have killed him outright, rather than sold him off to Egypt. There was worry and anxiety about what would happen to them now that Joseph held the reigns of power and they were at his mercy. This was new territory. This was a time of great uncertainty.

Joseph's words conveyed grace. "You meant me harm, but God turned it around for good, even your own good." This was no longer the same brother they had sold into slavery. God had freed him from that past, granting him a new ability to forgive and see his brothers from the perspective of their need, rather than his desire to get ahead. He was freed to become God's instrument for granting and maintaining life. Joseph had been changed from the inside out.

When Jesus spoke of internal change, he got some of the religious folk upset. Jesus was concerned with an inner freedom and transformation. It is much easier to catalogue and categorize by

some other external means. It is easier to determine who is worthy or unworthy by some external marker than it is for us to take the time to get to know people.

The disciples were well aware that Jesus had stepped on toes. They were concerned with how Jesus' words would be heard and interpreted. They were seemingly more concerned with the political ramifications of what Jesus said than the content he was communicating. Jesus was more concerned with their understanding. Clean living before God is not about a list of rules and regulations on what is or is not appropriate. It is more in line with living along the parameters of Isaiah's words.

Isaiah had called the people to understand that all those they considered unclean and unfit for God were invited by God to participate in the blessings to Israel. Being fit was more a question of doing justice than of being of the right group of people. *Yahweh* is the God who gathers the outcasts, the unfit, the pushed aside, and ignored. God is not so concerned with rites, rituals, food, drink, and categorizing people as with justice, mercy, love, and grace.

The Pharisees' insistence on ritual and observance of all the correct rites focused on their own standing, while ignoring the needs of others. Ignorant bliss regarding the needs of others is a tool of our self-condemnation. It is too easy to look inward to what we have and work to protect our standing. The gospel calls us not to self-absorbed introspection, but to outwardly focused grace, mercy, and justice.

Jesus used the Canaanite woman as a living example of his teaching. Modeling the stance of the Pharisees, Jesus wrote her off as too defiled, unworthy, and beyond the reach of God's grace. Only when she cleaned up her act would she be worthy of any consideration. She was reportedly beyond Jesus' reach, yet she was hungry for God's grace and love. Regardless of her categorization as defiled, dirty, and worthless, Jesus reached out to her on the basis of her inner quality of faith. She may have been deemed undefiled, but she received the needed grace to enjoy true freedom at Jesus' hands.

Paul desired to see his people freed. He yearned for their release from their defiled standing into the true freedom of obedience to faith. First, however, there was the problem of this disobedience and self-defiling self-importance. Claiming to be God's special people, they had evaded God's direction to live grace and acceptance for all the world. They were to be emissaries of God's mercy and grace. In showing mercy, they would attain mercy to share.

The church today is facing the same crisis of the Jews and Pharisees of Jesus' day. We have turned in on ourselves and our institutional structures, programs, buildings, and internal cultures. We have neglected to see those defiled in our sight as the ones for whom Christ died. We have ignored those such as the Canaanite woman, who would come to Christ in faith and fall upon the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus. We are too comfortable with our structures, routines, and the business of religious life. We fail to see those Jesus would free and deem undefiled. By our failure, we become one with the Jews of Jesus' day who cut themselves off from God's purpose to deem undefiled those on the outside. We become those defiled by our insistence on form, tradition, and a neglect of extending grace.

Joseph had to learn to see his brothers on the basis of their need, not from a desire to write off others. Jesus had to teach the disciples to see people from the same perspective. How will we view the world in our freedom? Will we live as truly free and undefiled in the heart of the gospel?

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