

# Saying “No” to Mrs. Potiphar

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Last week we started into Genesis 39 and saw how Joseph and the house of Potiphar were blessed by God. But no sooner than Joseph starts to experience these blessings, we find someone who is all too ready to put Joseph to the test. And the question arises: God has been faithful to Joseph, but can Joseph withstand a temptation that will determine just how faithful he will be to God? Well, we find out in the following passage: <sup>6b</sup> Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, <sup>7</sup> and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" <sup>8</sup> But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. <sup>9</sup> No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" <sup>10</sup> And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her. <sup>11</sup> One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. <sup>12</sup> She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. <sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, <sup>14</sup> she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. <sup>15</sup> When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house." <sup>16</sup> She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. <sup>17</sup> Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. <sup>18</sup> But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house." <sup>19</sup> When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. <sup>20a</sup> Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. Genesis 39:6b-20a (NIV)

When we consider this Scripture, we sometimes conclude that its sole message is to resist sexual temptation: Do not commit adultery, do not engage in sexual relationships outside the context of marriage, and so forth. And no question about it, that is one of the points that is being made in this narrative. Sexual temptation for a man such as Joseph—handsome, young, full of vigor, well that’s a tough temptation to overcome. All I can say is that it is a good thing that Samson wasn’t Potiphar’s servant. Samson didn’t fare so well when confronted with such tests. In fact, Samson seemed intent in placing himself in the position to be able to take advantage of most any attractive female who might be in his vicinity—but, not so with Joseph.

Joseph teaches us that the best thing to do when tempted is to distance yourself from whatever it is that's tempting you. A person with alcoholic tendencies doesn't help himself by going into a bar, any more than someone with sexual temptations would by going into a strip club. When tempted by Potiphar's wife, Joseph didn't hang around, he immediately booked it on out of there. That's an obvious, but completely indispensable lesson for all of us no matter what form the temptation may be—sexual or otherwise. If the wages of sin are death, why would you hang around the sin, because if you do, death will eventually strike you?

Take the case of Larry Moor, the founder of the British Columbia Association of Reptile Owners. Moor used to visit schools and give talks to elementary aged students teaching them not to fear snakes. He made it his life's goal to educate the public that they have nothing to fear from poisonous snakes. As part of his presentation, he would often emphasize that there are only two snakes in the entire world that are really dangerous—one of them is the Egyptian cobra. Yet, he also liked to emphasize just how beautiful the Egyptian cobra is. No one knows exactly how this happened, but one day Moor apparently felt so compelled to enjoy the beauty of one of his Egyptian Cobras that he got a little too close. According to the police reports, Moor was last seen running into the street screaming at the top of his lungs that his cobra had bitten him. Onlookers were helpless to rush him to the hospital because in a matter of seconds he was dead. Joseph knew that the Egyptian wife of Potiphar was just as deadly as an Egyptian cobra. And so when she tried to grab him for her own sensual pleasure, he pulled away and put as much distance between him and her as possible. When we are confronted with the things that tempt us most, that's the best policy—simply turn and run away.<sup>1</sup>

It's a valuable lesson that we can see in Joseph's handling of Mrs. Potiphar's advances. But, it is not the only lesson—there is a deeper, more central theme here. Notice that when Mrs. Potiphar addresses Joseph, she is not merely offering him an invitation for having an affair with her. Rather, she is ordering him to do so. When she tells Joseph to "come" to her, it's not a request; it's a command. And considering Mrs. Potiphar high social status, it is quite likely that she was used to having her commands obeyed. And if anyone was so bold as to defy her commands—well, they'd have to suffer some pretty dire the consequences. So, it's not just that Mrs. Potiphar is a temptation for Joseph; she is also an authority figure who could cause him great harm if she is not obeyed. And to Joseph's great credit, he not only disobeyed her, but he confronted her with the reasons for his disobedience. He tells her that "my master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" Thus, his first point is that it is unethical to breach Mr. Potiphar's great trust in him. Secondly, he reminds Mrs. Potiphar that she is Mr. Potiphar's wife,

thus implying that it might be well for her to show Mr. Potiphar a little faithfulness in their marriage. But, Joseph saved the most important point for last—he could not possibly consider sleeping with her because it would be a “sin against God.” Yes, Joseph reminds her of all of these things knowing that the coming scorn of this woman would be an awful thing to bear.

Nevertheless, Joseph refused to compromise his faith even though he knew that staying faithful would result in great cost to himself personally. And so, if Potiphar didn’t have him killed—which was certainly a possibility—Joseph knew that about the best he could hope for would be placed in the king’s prison. As it turns out, in God’s grace, that is exactly what happened. So, Joseph was subjected to a great fall—from being the head administrator of Potiphar’s household, he had been cast without just cause into prison. Yet, he willingly accepted that fall from man’s grace, to stay in God’s grace. That is the real challenge for us, especially in the world that we live in today. It is the challenge to choose God’s way when we know that it’s going to be costly. And it continues to be a great challenge because there a lot of Mrs. Potiphar’s running around today who will continue to confront you with such choices.

For example, what if your boss at work commands you to do something, but you know that it is dishonest, maybe even potentially hurtful to other people. You know that if you do it, you’ll gain the boss’s favor, maybe even get a promotion or salary raise. But if you don’t—maybe you’ll end up getting fired. What would you do? That’s what confronted Sammy Lightsey, the plant manager for a peanut butter company that had a big contract to supply peanut butter to a large national wholesaler. The owner of the peanut butter plant wanted him to make shipments of peanut butter before they were actually tested for salmonella, and then send out fake documents that claimed they were salmonella-free. His boss put as much pressure on him as Mrs. Potiphar tried to put on Joseph. Sammy complained, but his boss’s reply was “just ship it!” Sammy was no Joseph and he complied with his boss’s demands. As a result, nine people died and more than 700 in 46 states became ill from salmonella poisoning after the contaminated peanut butter hit the shelves of stores across the country.<sup>2</sup>

Or maybe it’s not a boss who takes on the role of Mrs. Potiphar—maybe it’s a co-worker who wants you to participate in a scheme to rip off your employer by doing a little in-store shop lifting. If you refuse, it’s pretty clear that your fellow co-workers are going to shun you—maybe they’ll take a tip from Mrs. Potiphar and make up lies about your work performance to your supervisor. It’s a scenario that runs rampant among American retailers today. Fortune magazine indicates that “light-fingered employees cost American stores more than shoplifters do.” In fact, employee thefts account for 43% of company losses in this country.<sup>3</sup> It’s getting harder and harder to make the choice of Joseph these days.

Or maybe Mrs. Potiphar assumes a different position—one in which she symbolizes the government. A government that comes down on anyone who breaks the rules—even if the alleged “rule-breaker” is simply trying to be true to God’s Word. This past Monday the U. S. Supreme Court opened its October term, and one of the cases that is drawing the most attention is *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. The Colorado Civil Rights Commission*. On one day in July of 2012, Jack Phillips, a Christian, was going about his business baking wedding cakes that, by all accounts, are like works of art. He didn’t realize it but he was about to have some special guests. He also didn’t realize that Mrs. Potiphar can sometimes show up unexpectedly in pairs. And so it was that Charlie Craig and David Mullins walked into his cake shop—feigning to pretend that this was the only place in the world that baked wedding cakes. They approached Jack and told him to bake them a cake for their upcoming gay wedding. But, Jack refused. He didn’t refuse because he hated gays—as a Christian, he didn’t hate anyone. In fact, Jesus taught him to love everyone, even his enemies.<sup>4</sup> He didn’t refuse because he viewed them as his enemies—up to this point in time they’d done nothing to him. Jack refused to bake that wedding cake because God’s Word makes several clear statements about homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 18:22 tells us that God finds homosexual behavior detestable.<sup>6</sup> Paul when writing to the Romans indicates that God will judge such indecent and perverted behavior whether it’s practiced between women or between men.<sup>7</sup> And perhaps the most pertinent thing for Jack was the fact that 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians tells us that if we, as Christians, facilitate homosexual behavior, we are actually participating in actions that direct people away from the Kingdom of God and into the pit of Hell.<sup>8</sup> And upon that biblical basis, not to mention his Constitutional right to religious freedom under the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment, Jack politely told them that he could not bake them a cake and, thus, tacitly endorse, condone and facilitate the sin that they were perpetrating.

Now some people would object and say, “Wait a minute—all they wanted was a wedding cake! They weren’t asking him, as merely the baker, to endorse anything.” Really? I wonder how the F.B.I., Homeland Security and the Justice Department would look upon Jack if he were a nuclear engineer, instead of a baker, and two members of ISIS approached him and asked him to make them a nuclear bomb. Would it be OK to make them a bomb? Jack might ask: “So, guys—what are you going to do with the bomb?” And our friends from ISIS might respond: “Oh, don’t worry, Jack, we’re just going to use it for a little fireworks display.” [Jack:] “Well, if it’s only for that—here’s your freshly baked nuclear weapon.” I think the legal term that the Justice Department would use to describe Jack under this hypothetical would be “accomplice” or “co-conspirator.” In the eyes of the law, Jack would be just as

guilty as the ISIS terrorists. And in the eyes of God, Jack would be just as guilty of sin in baking that gay wedding cake.

But, Jack—like Joseph—knew that, when he refused, these two “Mrs. Potiphar’s” were not about to leave him alone. Of course, they could have gone to another bakery, but that wasn’t their real intent in the first place. So, they didn’t leave him alone. They promptly headed to the Colorado Civil Rights Commission where their complaint against Jack was welcomed with open arms. To no one’s surprise, the Commission ruled against him. They scolded him for discriminating against these two “Mrs. Potiphar’s” on the basis of sexual orientation. And they told Jack that he’d better change his ways or he’d be in bigger trouble. They ordered Jack and his staff to be re-educated in the ways of gays and to rid themselves of their religious views. God’s Word didn’t mean anything to them—after all, they had regulations to follow. And just to make sure that Jack didn’t revert back into any of his biblical views, they ordered him to file quarterly reports on his progress on baking as many gay wedding cakes as possible.

When Jack appealed this to the Colorado Court of Appeals, they upheld the decision of the Civil Rights Commission. The Colorado Supreme Court would not even hear his case. So, Jack’s case is just now coming before the Justices of the United States Supreme Court<sup>9</sup> who will decide whether Christians will continue to enjoy religious freedom or whether we will be ordered to bow down to the unholy god of the LGBT community, otherwise known as Satan. The problem is there are some “Mrs. Potiphars” on that Court, and not all of them are female. Keep an eye on the news—the outcome of this case could well be decisive. And if it’s not good news—then may we, as Christians, have the courage and faithfulness of Joseph to keep God’s Word and not bow to the rulings of man.

Joseph is often referred to by Christian theologians as a “type” for Jesus. It simply means that, in certain aspects of Joseph’s life and experiences, we can see a foreshadowing of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And here, in Genesis 39, we can see Joseph’s reaction to Mrs. Potiphar. Joseph remained faithful despite the cost. In the Old Testament, we might call it the “*Joseph standard.*” Today, it is the “*Jesus standard.*” It is a standard that is not subject to compromise, and it has two important parts. The first one bids you to take up your cross and follow Jesus<sup>10</sup>; but, the second part insists that you don’t do so until you count the costs.<sup>11</sup> I.E., if you can’t stand the heat that Christians must endure, don’t get in the Christian kitchen in the first place—you’ll only be in the way. It is my prediction that the heat in that kitchen is about to be turned up considerably. And if you choose to stay out of it, you can enjoy every privilege and pleasure that all the Mrs. Potiphar’s of this world can give you. You can avoid

taking that intense heat the world will put upon you if you dare to resist. Things will be cool and comfortable in this life, but much hotter and wholly unpleasant in the next.

Yes, choosing to do what God demands of us is quite often a very costly thing to do. The Christian writer, Catherine Booth, puts it this way: “There comes a crisis, a moment when every human soul which enters the Kingdom of God has to make its choice of that Kingdom in preference to everything else”<sup>12</sup> that the world offers in its place: The world of Mrs. Potiphar or the Kingdom of Jesus Christ—the choice is up to you.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church  
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2017

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Kennedy, *Preaching Illustrations Vol 1.*, WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 423.

<sup>2</sup> “Georgia peanut plant manager testifies that company faked salmonella tests,” The Associated Press, August 8, 2014; <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/georgia-peanut-plant-manager-testifies-company-faked-salmonella-tests-article-1.1897287>.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Fisher, <http://fortune.com/2015/01/26/us-retail-worker-theft/> (Jan. 26, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:27 (TLB) “Listen, all of you. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.”

<sup>5</sup> *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: “HOMOSEXUALITY”.

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 18:22 (NIV) Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 1:24-27 (NIV) <sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup> They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. <sup>26</sup> Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (NIV) <sup>9</sup> Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders <sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Kurtz, “Supreme Court’s in session with Gorsuch on board, gay wedding cake case on deck,” <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2017/10/02/supreme-court-s-in-session-with-gorsuch-on-board-gay-wedding-cake-case-on-deck.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 14:27 (TLB) And no one can be my disciple who does not carry his own cross and follow me.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 14:28 (TLB) “But don’t begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first getting estimates and then checking to see if he has enough money to pay the bills?”

<sup>12</sup> Elesha Hodge, comp., *Today’s Best Illustrations – Volumes 1-4*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: “CONVERSATION”.