

[persecuted Christian video]

My name is JR. I'm the teaching pastor here and today I'd like to meditate on forgiveness with you. What comes to mind when you think of forgiveness? We all know forgiveness is a good thing. What's more praiseworthy than, having been wronged, offering grace and peace when that wrong-doer comes crawling back, admitting they're wrong?

For most of us, forgiveness is a gift we give once someone apologizes. When we've been wounded by another person, we hold that, protecting ourselves. And then when they come to apologize, we let it go, offering forgiveness as a gift to them.

(Now, I know some of us are probably not even that generous: when someone apologizes, we hold on even tighter, making them pay for what they did for us. We all know that's toxic. So I want to give you the benefit of the doubt, assume you're going to choose to forgive, and focus on that decision: to forgive.)

I want to suggest this morning that we're not doing ourselves a favor by holding forgiveness back, by waiting for that other person to come back. That in fact, choosing *not* to forgive only hurts US, that that thing we're holding in is a poison that destroys us the longer we keep it.

Forgiveness is something best done as soon as possible, without regard for how the other person treats us, or whether they ask for our forgiveness. Forgiveness is for you (for me) before it's for them.

I learned this fairly early in life. When I was 13, my dad left my mom for another woman. In that time of my life, the dominant emotion I felt was anger. I didn't feel guilty, I didn't blame myself like a lot of children of divorce do. I was sad, but I wasn't nearly as sad as I was *angry*.

And probably because I was 13 and still didn't really understand how the world worked, I heaped all my anger on the Other Woman. In a situation with plenty of blame to go around, I put it all on her. I would fantasize about what I'd say to her, what I'd do to her when I saw her.

That went on for days? Weeks? And you can imagine what happened to me, right? I became angrier and angrier, more twisted in on myself. My soul diminished until I had little room in my young heart for anything but hatred of her. I was holding onto it tightly. My hatred for her consumed all my thoughts.

Any of you who've been hurt or wronged badly enough know the sort of anger I'm describing. The white-hot ball of hatred that sits in the pit of your stomach, slowly cooling to bitterness. There's a heaviness to it that weighs down your whole self, makes it harder to breathe, harder to walk, harder to live.

Forgiveness, then, is the freedom from this weight. It's a lightness in our souls that comes from choosing not to be defined by what someone else did to you. The freedom of forgiveness reshapes our whole lives, creates us as persons who can know joy, who have a largeness of spirit.

We're in a series right now called BOLD. Each week, we've heard the stories of Christians around the world who are suffering for their faith. Brothers and sisters whose choice to follow Jesus costs

them much more than it costs us here. Their stories, along with stories in the Scriptures, challenge us to live more boldly, to take God's claims more seriously, and ultimately to be more faithful pictures of Jesus.

Anyone who's ever been hurt knows forgiveness isn't easy. So today, I want to consider with you what BOLD forgiveness could look like in our lives. We've seen what it looks like in the life of the families of Jim Elliot and his fellow missionaries. Now let's see what it looks like *and* what it doesn't look like from two family reunions in the Scriptures. Two families that each have two children, two sons, two brothers. Two stories in which the younger brother wronged the family - including the older brother - in some way. These two stories are told about and mostly from the perspective of younger brothers, but today I want to consider the older brothers.

These older brothers demonstrate for us the cost of unforgiveness, and the freedom we can find in choosing to forgive. They demonstrate that forgiveness is for you before it's for them.

So turn with me first to Luke 15:25-32. If you grabbed one of our bibles off the rack on the way in, it's on page XXX. If you don't own a bible, we'd be honored if you would take that one and consider it a gift from us. This is the end of a famous story Jesus told. Most teachers call it the story of the Prodigal Son. But again, today I want to focus not on the younger sons, but the older. So listen to the end of the story, or read along with me beginning in v25:

The older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!' -- Luke 15:25-30

If you've ever wrestled with unforgiveness, you recognize the bitterness in his voice. *All these years, I've slaved for you. Never once did you throw me a party. This son of yours comes back...*

You can hear the venom in his voice. You recognize it.

We'll come back to this brother standing in a field spewing hate in a moment. But hold on to this picture [a field with a party tent in the background] while we look in on the other story.

Turn with me back to Genesis 33. Again, in our bibles, this is on page XXXX. This story, too, is about a reunion between two brothers. They're twins named Esau and Jacob. And just like in the story of the Prodigal, the younger - Jacob - has wronged the elder, Esau. And just like in the last story, Jacob is coming home.

Jacob is convinced Esau is going to kill him. He's just found out Esau is coming to meet him with 400 soldiers. Jacob is so scared that he sent bribes ahead of him. Let's look in on the scene:

Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming with his 400 men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and his two servant wives. He put the servant wives and their children at the front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last.

Jacob is making contingency plans. He's so scared Esau is going to kill him that he's protecting his wives and children, placing them inside his small army.

Then Jacob went on ahead. As he approached his brother, he bowed to the ground seven times before him.

Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. And they both wept. -- Genesis 33:1-4

Two dramatically different pictures: [side-by-side: guy in the field alone vs. men embracing] one, a man standing alone in a field, angry and bitter. The other, a man embracing his brother, weeping over their reunion. It's tempting to wonder if maybe Esau just didn't have it as bad as the Prodigal's older brother.

But to read the story of Esau and Jacob is to learn that's not the case. Esau was the elder of the two, which meant he was their father's legitimate heir. He received not only double the portion of the estate when his father died - literally twice as much as the younger brother, but he also received an irrevocable verbal blessing that conferred the authority to rule the family.

The early stories of Esau and Jacob present Esau as a competent but not particularly bright person, and his father's favorite son (as was often the case with the eldest son), while Jacob is a mamma's boy. If they were making a coming-of-age drama out of Esau and Jacob's story, Esau would be the star athlete his dad's always bragging about while Jacob would've been the nerdy, bookish kid who's a little too smart for his own good.

Esau's worst crime was probably not paying enough attention to how clever Jacob was, not taking his role as the first-born son seriously enough. While they're still teens, Jacob convinces Esau to sell his birthright - that double portion of the inheritance - for some food when Esau's hungry. Not Esau's finest moment.

But the real blow comes when their father is dying. Esau goes out to hunt down some food so he can make a feast for his father, to initiate the ceremony when he's going to receive that irrevocable verbal blessing. And while he's gone, Jacob tricks their father into giving that blessing to him. He steals Esau's future from him.

Esau nurtures a rage. The Bible describes it like this:

From that time on, Esau hated Jacob because their father had given Jacob the blessing. And Esau began to scheme: "I will soon be mourning my father's death. Then I will kill my brother, Jacob." - Genesis 27:41

Jacob hears of Esau's plotting and flees the country. So up until that embrace we read earlier, this is the last interaction Esau and Jacob had: Jacob stole Esau's future, so Esau began plotting to kill him.

Fast-forward a couple of decades, and we can understand, then, why Jacob was so nervous to see his brother again. We would be nervous, too, wouldn't we? But what I find more fascinating is Esau's response:

He meets Jacob with embrace, not anger.

Quite different from Jesus' story of the Prodigal. He doesn't steal anything from the older brother. He goes to the father and asks for his portion - that smaller third reserved for younger brothers. Then he too leaves and blows through all his money. In the end, he has nowhere to turn but home, so he comes back, bowing and groveling (much like Jacob did to Esau).

The Prodigal's father is still alive, and he welcomes the younger son back with open arms, throws a big party in his honor. But *his* older brother wants no part of it. There's no embrace, no welcome. He won't even acknowledge their relationship - rather than calling him "my brother", he refers to him as "that son of yours".

[bring the picture back up] Two dramatically different family reunions: one marked by forgiveness, love and welcome. The other tarnished by spite, bitterness and anger.

The Prodigal's older brother I understand. That anger, that bitterness, wondering when that ungrateful snot is going to make his way out into the field, to bow at *my* feet, ask *my* forgiveness. I can picture him, out in the field with his hoe or whatever, muttering to himself, imagining all the things he'll say to his brother. Holding that bitterness tight.

What I don't understand is Esau's story. See, if you read through Genesis, you get Jacob's story. You learn how he got from exile in another country to marriage to finally having nowhere left to go but home again. You see how he grows and changes.

But not Esau. The last time we saw him, he was just as angry and bitter as the Prodigal's older brother - probably more so since he's actually plotting how to kill his brother. But now, there's no anger, no bitterness. Esau has built a great life for himself - despite having lost everything, despite having it stolen by his brother, he's somehow found the strength of character to move on, to get over it, to leave it behind him.

The Esau Jacob bows before isn't a small man ruled by anger and bitterness. He has a largeness about him, that same largeness we saw in [the Elliot family](#). We would love to have a record of Esau's journey, too, because he clearly has not let his life be defined by what Jacob took from him.

Esau doesn't look like someone who's been ruled by a grudge. He doesn't look like someone who's held on to his rage, his bitterness against his brother.

He looks like someone who's found the freedom of forgiveness. He looks like a person who's learned not to let what someone else did to him define his whole life. He looks like a person who's taken responsibility for what he can control: himself, and refused to let someone else's bad choices dictate his own actions, his emotions or his reactions.

When we compare Esau's freedom to the Prodigal's brother's bitterness, how could we want anything less? How could we want to cling to our anger, our hate when we can see such a better possibility?

A vision of what forgiveness *could* look like is the first step toward that forgiveness. I first experienced it as a kid - when I was nurturing my hatred for the woman my dad cheated with. I clearly remember a day I was just out walking, and all I could think about was how much I hated her. That bitterness and anger consumed me - I couldn't think about anything else.

But a small part of my soul recognized how ugly this was, and that tiny bit of myself prayed. I didn't know what to pray, how to pray. I didn't ask God to rewind time or rewrite my parents' brains to love each other again or anything like that. I just prayed, God I don't like the way I feel. I don't like this anger, I don't like what it's doing to me. But I don't know how to fix it. I don't know how not to be angry. I don't know how not to hate her. Help me!

In retrospect, it was about the most pitiful prayer I could pray. I didn't have a plan, I didn't have a clear idea of what I was asking for. I couldn't see a way out of this pit of anger I felt myself sliding into. I just asked for help.

And this is where my story gets a little weird, where my experience of God moves a bit beyond the bounds of language, but this is what happened:

The moment after I prayed that pitiful cry for help, my anger and bitterness were gone. My soul felt 1,000 times lighter. It was as though I'd been held underwater, unable to breathe, and suddenly in my desperate clawing for oxygen, I was pulled up into the air and I could breathe again.

That anger, the hatred I'd nurtured for days or weeks until that point was completely absent, and the void it left in my soul was so clear, the lack was so palpable I was shocked.

This experience probably sounds strange to you. And it didn't last. After a few hours, that bitterness began to seep back into my life, into my heart. As the weeks, months and years wore on, I had to learn how to forgive, how to remove that bitterness from my life and from my heart myself.

But for that 13-year old kid whose life had just been turned upside down, those few moments of peace were life-changing. They showed me that my unforgiveness bound me in chains that weighed down my soul. It was like I didn't know I was drowning until I could breathe the air of forgiveness again.

In those moments, God showed me a vision of my life without chains, a life of the freedom of forgiveness. So even though the freedom that experience didn't last, the vision endured. And as I returned to the reality of my situation, I never forgot how good it felt to be free.

That clear vision of the freedom gave me the strength and courage to learn to forgive. And not just in my parents' divorce. As you can tell, that experience framed every other struggle to forgive in the rest of my life. Any time I begin to get bogged down in unforgiveness, any time a grudge insinuates itself in my soul and I sense that heaviness, whenever that oppressive atmosphere of

bitterness begins to clog my lungs, I return to that vision of freedom. I'm reminded what the cost of unforgiveness is, how anger suffocates me. That I need to forgive not for the other person's sake, but for my own. Because Forgiveness is about me before it's about them.

That's the choice before us today: what kind of "older brother" will you be? [the side-by-side pic] If you struggle with unforgiveness, if you're harboring a grudge, if you're holding tight to something someone else has done to you, today God is opening up a space for you to imagine forgiveness is possible. Today can be the day you choose to forgive like Esau did, the day your head breaks the surface of your bitterness and you breathe again, remembering how good the freedom of forgiveness feels.

When the older brother refused to come in from the field, the father went out to him. As Jesus tells the story:

*His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!' -- Luke 15:31-32*

If you're standing out in that field, harboring bitterness and anger, your heavenly father has come out to you. He's pleading with you not to stay where you are, enslaved by your unforgiveness, unable to enjoy the party. He's pleading with you to let go of all that, to come back to the party and live in the freedom of forgiveness.

The only person you're hurting is *you*. You need to forgive not for the sake of the person who hurt you, but for the sake of your own soul!

This is a dangerous, painful thing to give up. Even once you can imagine a life free from bitterness and anger, getting there can be hard. That's why it's better not to make that journey alone.

If you're wrestling with unforgiveness today, if you feel bound up, trapped, suffocated by it, the best first step for you is to find a safe person in your life to invite into that journey. Share your pain with them, ask them to pray with you, to hurt with you, to walk toward freedom with you.

God did not create us to be alone, and that includes in our journey to forgiveness. So find that safe person and share with them. Let them walk with you toward the freedom of forgiveness.

### **Space for Forgiveness**

What does your first step of forgiveness look like?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us that unforgiveness in our hearts poisons everything else we do. It's as harmful to our souls as murder. He challenges us to pursue forgiveness and reconciliation before we worship, to get rid of those things we're grasping so tightly because they stand between us and God.

<space to choose forgiveness>

### **Communion Set Up**

We close today by coming to the communion table. It's appropriate, given that our journey to the freedom of forgiveness must begin by recognizing that we're all prodigals welcomed home by our Father and Older Brother. Only by looking to Jesus can we find the strength and courage this journey toward forgiveness will require.

You don't have to be a member of our church family to receive this communion. This is Jesus' table, and it's open to anyone who wants God's forgiveness, anyone who wants to come forward and find the freedom God offers all of us.

We come to this table and receive wafers of bread (which are gluten-free, for those of you with that intolerance). These wafers remind us of Jesus' body, which was broken for us, for our wasteful, thoughtless wandering from God.

We dip the wafers in grape juice, which represents Jesus' blood, poured out for our sin. His blood is our forgiveness, a tangible reminder that Jesus reconnects us to God. This table, this meal, is Jesus' invitation to the party he's throwing to welcome us home.

It's in his example we learn what the freedom of forgiveness looks like. Let's come to his table, receive his vision of forgiveness and walk into the forgiveness we find there.