

Living with Christ

FORGIVE AND BE SET FREE

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One of Jesus' best-known parables is of "The Prodigal Son" (Luke 15). In this two-part story Jesus gives us some of the clearest insight into his own heart. He invites us to meet a God more wonderful than we had ever imagined, a God of truly unconditional forgiveness and extravagant love. No matter how badly we've messed up, God is always inviting us home, waiting to welcome us again into loving arms. This is the God of Jesus.

Then, after this stunning story of a Dad's astonishing love, Jesus turns us dramatically to the older brother. It is pretty obvious that the prodigal son is lost; but it is just as true that—in his anger—the elder brother is also lost. And because the father loves this son just as much, he invites him home also, asking him to move beyond his hurt and anger at his younger brother. This, too, is the God of Jesus.

Many Scripture scholars tell us that forgiveness is the heart of the gospel, the clearest summary of the message of Jesus. We see Jesus forgive and we hear his clarion call that we do the same. Why is forgiveness so important to Jesus? It's simple: Jesus loves us so much that he wants us to be free! Jesus know that if we want a joy-filled life, we have to take this road-less-traveled and do the hard work of forgiving. And if we don't?

Some years ago, a man I know buried his daughter, the victim of a drunken driver. We talked about what it felt like for him to try to go

through life without his daughter, taken from him in such a senseless act. He talked about how it broke his heart to watch his other family members grieve, and how lonely it was to watch the rest of the world go on as if nothing had happened.

He said, “I will have anger, but I will not have hatred. If I have hatred in my heart, that senseless act of violence claims another victim.” This heartbroken man knows a profound truth. There is a price to pay for not forgiving. The smoldering anger of non-forgiveness will cause great harm, whether we are aware of it or not. Jesus knows we have all been wronged: each of us—in small ways or in big ways—has been treated unfairly, taken advantage of, or been harmed by some injustice.

What we choose to do with those wrongs will profoundly affect the kind of person we are, the kind of life we have. Most simply: forgiveness is not optional for those who want a joy-filled, meaningful life. Forgiveness is essential to our souls; it is the heart of truly holy and happy living. To not forgive has been well described as like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. The rat will be just fine, but we won’t. Some part of us dies.

We could try revenge, repression, or resentment, but only forgiveness breaks us open to a life of joy. Through his life and even in his death, Jesus proclaimed that forgiveness is the path to life. As does Jesus, I believe that all the holy ones who love us and have gone before us in death would also tell us that the work of forgiveness is worth it. For when we forgive, we are not losing. We are setting ourselves free.