

Teaching and Living Forgiveness

by R. H.

Women colleagues encouraged our Women's Ministry Consultant to develop a meeting place where they could interact with the purpose of 'spurring one another on to love and good deeds'. Thus, *In the Loop* came into existence. A group of women, plus two men, receive and contribute to a monthly email letter that provides the platform for this electronic forum. A year ago one of the contributors from the Middle East sparked a discussion on forgiveness when she wrote the following:

I have been challenged recently when visiting women. They have such hard lives and difficult struggles, and I feel quite unequipped to help them. How can I turn their issues and problems to lead them to the Saviour?

I was challenged when I was sharing with a woman struggling with unforgiveness. Of course she couldn't forgive without knowing the power of the Holy Spirit. How do I lead her to a God who forgives? She seemed so closed by her unforgiving heart. Does she need a God who heals her heart first? We need such wisdom to know how God is working in such women's lives. Only He can turn hurt and unforgiveness into healing and forgiveness. We need more of Him and less of us... but what is our part?

The subsequent responses of several women are given below to help open up

this subject to *Seedbed* readers. What would you like to add to what has already been said?

From North America

The issue of the need to forgive comes up a lot, doesn't it? I usually share personal stories of walking through the process of forgiving someone. I also pray out loud with my friend. For example:

God, you are a forgiving and merciful God. Thank you for forgiving me over and over and especially for what happened on the cross. Thank you for Jesus' words when He said: 'Forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.' Please help my friend to get her anger and resentment towards that other person out and to release the offence so that she can be healed and free in her spirit. And God, in the name of Jesus, bring her to the place where she can actually bless the other one.

I pray constantly with Muslim ladies... I then urge them to say out loud as many times as is needed, in privacy, over the next few weeks: 'I bless so-and-so.' This is so unnatural and repulsive that it brings them to the realization that they usually can't bless. At this point I share with them what I do: I tell God my hatred and anger for so-and-so, how unfair such and such a thing was, how I would like to really hurt so-and-so, and how I

would like God to punish so-and-so. I write in my journal all my anger and pain. I then think of Jesus and the cross and I know that Jesus' way is the best; I want to follow his example. I then tell God 'sorry' for my unforgiving spirit and I ask him to help me to forgive and actually be able to bless so-and-so. Besides my stories, I tell them stories like the one of Corrie ten Boom, etc. – lots and lots of stories of forgiveness.

I don't think I've met a Muslim lady who has completely forgiven an enemy but I have definitely seen some take steps [towards doing so]. I also talk very frankly and firmly with them about unforgiveness and what Jesus says. Muslims do respond to frankness and firmness!

Praise God when we hear our friends unload their hurt. We then have great opportunities to share about the cross.

From North Africa

Several helpful quotations on forgiveness come from Kimberly Snider in *Moments for Mothers*, a radio programme broadcast in the Philippines.

There is a process to forgiveness.

First, we must be ready to forgive. It requires time. How much time depends on the severity of our hurt and the closeness of the relationship. We may need to grieve for what might have been.

Second, we must decide to forgive. We may have to tell ourselves often, 'I have decided to forgive them. I will

let my anger or bitterness go.' Forgiveness means we actually stop blaming the person who hurt us.

Third, we enter a state of forgiveness. We can tell we really have forgiven someone when we honestly wish them well. Forgiveness must not depend on what they do or don't do. Forgiveness must depend on our decision to forgive.

When we forgive, we allow God to make us into the person he wants us to become. God forgives. When we forgive, we act like our Heavenly Father.

Then the contributor gives her personal experience:

A friend told me that it is easy to forgive but it is hard to forget. It was easy to say that I had forgiven my cousin whose actions severely strained important family relationships. However, during the forgiveness process, I could still feel the pain every time I saw her. I hated her so much that I didn't want to see her face. It took seven years for the wounds to heal.

In one of my quiet moments with God, he asked me if I had forgiven my cousin. I told him, yes, but that it wasn't easy to forget what she had done to my family. Then God told me to write a letter to her assuring her that I had forgiven her. When I started writing, my hand was shaking and I was crying. I told her that I wanted to see her to talk to her. When I met her face to face, I sought her forgiveness and again assured her that I had forgiven and forgotten those things

that she has done to me and to my family. We both cried.

From Europe

The answers on forgiveness have been good and very helpful. I found it interesting that those who had their own stories about forgiving were able to use these with their friends. Facing our own need in this area doesn't sit well with one's position as a missionary. Being vulnerable is important.

I am currently reading a book called *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* by Lewis B Smedes (Harper: ISBN 0-06-067431-8). It is very Western, but I was particularly taken by a section on deciding that forgiveness was really required. We are to forgive. We are not to settle for having an acceptance of differences or having a clarification of misunderstandings. Indeed we need to forgive for our own sakes. He suggests that there are two levels of deep pain – the first is more superficial, dealing with things that we can live with: annoyance, slights, disappointments, coming in second. The deeper hurts, though, are those that bring us into a crisis of forgiving: betrayal, disloyalty and brutality. The book goes on to talk about anger (that shows we are healthy) and hate (that shows we are wounding our own souls). I do think that forgiveness is a very big subject that is absolutely key to our understanding of the gospel.

From the Arabian Peninsula

I also have a friend struggling with forgiveness issues. It seemed to touch her when I shared about a difficult incident where I needed to forgive someone. Her situation was still harder in many ways, but she seemed to be touched by the fact that even though forgiveness was hard and I was very embarrassed by the incident, I still was working to forgive this person. I highlighted the issues like 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us' (Mt. 6).

John Piper uses a great analogy in one of his books to explain why forgiveness of sins isn't merely 'fire insurance' but is a way to remove obstacles between us and God, so that we can enjoy HIM forever in his presence in heaven.

From Europe

Thank you for what you have shared. I recognize that forgiveness is the most difficult teaching in my culture, because we are still living by 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' Love is also spoken about, but among ourselves, not for others outside. Thus, the Word of God has come to revolutionize our principles, not just to forgive our enemies, but also to love and bless them!

I agree with our sister who wrote that it is a choice to forgive or not to forgive, but I would add that we must also ask for God's help because, on our own, we will not be able to dredge up enough 'goodness' and 'compassion' to really forgive. In

several testimonies of North Africans, they said that it was this aspect of forgiveness that struck them the most. It is so much easier **not** to forgive than to forgive.

I recall attending a Bible study once on forgiveness. The study was excellent, but the comments and opinions expressed by the people in attendance were not based on the Word of God. One of the women said that the Bible taught that there are limits to forgiveness. The pastor didn't dare to contradict her, but I spoke with him and pointed out verses in Scripture which show that there are no limits because Jesus went all the way when he said, 'Father, forgive them because they don't know what they're doing.'

Would it be possible to draw a difference between forgiving someone and then regaining confidence in the person? Forgiveness is given, but confidence must be earned.

From North Africa

Soon after we first arrived in North Africa I noticed that the few Christians I met were struggling with the issue of forgiveness. Telling them straightforwardly of what Jesus says about it did not seem to sink in! I then felt I needed to know what the culture says about forgiveness. I made a questionnaire and asked all my local friends, Muslims and Christians, what forgiveness meant to them and to others around them. The majority of them said that it seems to be a time when you are waiting for a chance to repay.

I found that many relationships change after an offence has been received. Of course this happens in all cultures but resentment sometimes vanishes with time. Here, however, it can grow because there is no biblical teaching or influence in the society and the majority religion leaders do not teach about forgiveness and love! Those questioned also replied that although you say 'I forgive you' (*kanismah leak* in local dialect), in reality, something is broken and in some cases, it can never be mended again.

I discovered that it is the meaning of the word (*kanismah leak*) that was different. It does not carry the Christian meaning of forgiveness. It really carries a social meaning, whatever that is, and is not from God's forgiveness but from a human one. We might forgive even though we are not Christians but it is not the same forgiveness that Jesus taught us! In a Muslim home there is no teaching of 'if your friend hits you, tell him you forgive him'. In fact, when I asked mums in front of the school, they **all** said, 'If someone hits my boy or girl, I teach them not to let those children get away with it but to hit back and learn to be strong.'

I like the book *Right Relationships* by Tom Marshall (available in a good Arabic translation). The author writes about how God dealt with the broken relationship between himself and us because of our sins. The explanation that forgiveness is not forgetting and pretending nothing has happened is useful. Instead, forgiveness is admitting that the person has hurt me,

but not reacting by repaying evil for evil. I leave the judgement to God. Although Jesus might still have the traces of the suffering he received on earth, they are only scars. He left the offence in God's hand. Pointing out that Jesus also died for the sins of the person who caused the hurt can be initially shocking, but it makes sense after the victim has thought about it for a while. Most of the time

forgiveness is achieved through praying for the person **in love**.

The most important fact that is missing in the culture is the fact that forgiveness is a choice, not a mere feeling. I often quote the verses in Matthew 6:14 and 15 that come right after Jesus' prayer: *'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.'*
