



From Coping to Cure

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LESSON 11: I NEED TO FORGIVE THOSE SOLDIERS

THOUGHT STARTER:

Has a grudge ever helped you?

Be gentle and ready to forgive; never hold grudges. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.

Colossians 3:13, LB

A bloody civil war raged in Uganda. There were shortages of food, water, vehicles, gasoline, and clothing. The roads had potholes the size of a car. Everywhere we looked there were ugly war machines: tanks, trucks, artillery. We had to pass through frequent checkpoints manned by armed teenaged soldiers. We were stopped twelve times while driving the twenty-five miles from the Entebbe airport to the capital city of Kampala. Each checkpoint made us open our bags for inspection.

The next day, we were to travel to the city of Goma where I was scheduled to address a meeting. Sam, my driver, had been scouring in vain to find some gasoline for our vehicle. We were three hours late when Sam finally came to me to say he found some gas for \$30 per gallon. We needed fifteen gallons or \$450 worth.

I questioned our going. Who would wait for a foreign speaker who is three hours late? Sam convinced me we should go. It was a slow, bumpy ride and there were more road blocks manned by unfriendly soldiers. We arrived at the meeting place, which was packed with people. It was so hot and humid that the air in the room was almost unbearable.

I sat on the platform, looking out at the audience. I saw most of them were hungry. They were shabbily dressed and I knew no one in this audience had stood in front of a closet packed full of clothes and wondered what to wear. What could I say to these people when I had never wondered what I would eat or wear? I knew that many of them had suffered the death of a family member. Many of their families were scattered, some having fled into the forest to avoid being mowed down by hostile gunfire. I prayed silently, "Lord, I don't know what to say to these people. God, you have to help me."

The only thought that came to me was:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23, NKJV)

I told them I believed that each one of them could have all they wanted of a free gift. The gift was the fruit of the Spirit. It was freely available to my people, and I believed it was also available to them.

AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE

After the meeting, a raggedly dressed man approached me. He said I seemed uncertain about my message. He reassured me that the fruit of the Spirit was available in Uganda, but I had left an important condition out of my message. He asked me if I would take the time to come to his home. He would like to tell me his story.

As we walked down a dusty road in the intense heat, he pointed to a large house, with perhaps five or six bedrooms, up in the hills. "That was my house," he said, "but Idi Amin's soldiers came one day and took it as headquarters for his army. My family had to flee and today they are in the forest. I had a Mercedes-Benz parked in front of my clothing store. One day the soldiers came and took my car. Then they took my store."

We had been walking on this dusty road lined with mud-walled huts with thatched roofs. We came to one and he indicated that this was where he lived. We entered it: one dark room, dirt floor, and a box on the floor. He motioned to me to sit on the box. He sat on the other end of it and continued his story.

"I would sit in my chair and work myself into a frenzy over the soldiers who took my car, my business, my house, and scattered my family. I was consumed with hatred, bitterness, and anger.

When I was forced to leave my house, I took along a chair. I had a cow, also, which needed some fly spray. I traded my chair for the fly spray, but my cow died. I also had a goat and traded my goat for some seeds to plant a garden. But it didn't rain, so my garden failed. Now I have no car, no business, no house, no family, no chair, no cow, no goat, no garden.

One day, as I sat on this box and rehearsed all of this, I thought I would burst with hatred and animosity. A man came to my door in the middle of this situation. He said he was a missionary and had come to tell me that God loved me. That's all I heard. 'God loves me?' I exploded: 'Do you know what has happened to me?'

In a rage, I picked that man up and threw him out of my house. God loves me! I was so mad I could hardly contain myself! To my surprise, the man got up and

came back in. I was startled at his boldness. He said he had come to tell me about Jesus and would like to continue. He told me, 'God loves you so much that He gave His own Son to die for you. If you ask Him, He will come into your life and change your heart.'

At the moment I was so furious I hardly knew what to do with myself. Then suddenly, what this man said gave me some hope. I needed something, so I asked Jesus to come into my life right then. He did.

Now I come to the part of my story that has to do with your message. I told you that something was missing.

When I asked Jesus to come into my life, I could still see my home occupied by soldiers, my Mercedes-Benz being driven by soldiers, my business ruined, my family scattered, without a garden, and wondering how to survive. My heart was still filled with animosity toward those soldiers. My new friend read me a Bible verse intended for children of God:

'If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.' (Matthew 6:14-15, NKJV)

A shaft of light into utter darkness! I needed to forgive those soldiers. I needed to love them. Suddenly I wanted to love them. I opened my heart and poured out all the hate and anger and bitterness that I had stored up there. All I wanted was the fruit of the Spirit in my heart."

"You are right," he said. "We can have all we want for free. But you must meet God's terms. You must forgive men their trespasses."

My new friend said he was the richest man in Uganda. He had been released from the unbearable load of sin (hate, anger, bitterness) and now was basking in the unlimited wealth of the fruit of the Spirit. He reminded me that God is the source of the fruit of the Spirit. As we parted, I promised him that I would share his story with others.

THE CONDITION OF MY HEART

As I walked away, I remembered a man who had never paid me back some money I had lent him. I had nursed a grudge against him for a long time. (Webster's defines a grudge as "cherished ill will with deep resentment at a real or imagined slight.") I, too, had to release that grudge; I did after a struggle similar to my new friend's struggle. The man still owed me the money, but what a difference to love a debtor instead of hating him.

My new friend faced greater problems than most of us can imagine. How foolish it was to add the pain resulting from hate, anger, and bitterness when he could change them

for peace, joy, love, kindness, and forgiveness.

I can be just as angry over my little problems as my friend could be over his big ones. The fact that a man did not pay me back my money did not determine what was in my heart. His decision only revealed the condition of my heart. The money issue is between the man and me. The condition of my heart is between God and me.

I will never forget the man from Uganda who took the time to minister to me. In order for any of us to experience the fruit of the Spirit, we must let go of our pet grudges. For him it meant to forgive those unnamed soldiers. For me it was someone who failed to repay a debt owed to me.

Many people who come to me for help hold long-standing grudges. Years ago I naively thought that it would be music to their ears to hear that they could let them go and be released from the ill will and animosity that gripped their hearts. I have learned that for many people, the older a grudge (or a pet peeve) gets, the more precious it becomes, like a family heirloom. A person can carefully nurture a grudge. It may be toward someone several thousand miles away. You can recall such a grudge when you have an odd moment to reminisce, work yourself into a frenzy, then carefully put it aside until you have another off moment. To give up that grudge would be a sacrifice rather than release.

Remember, God loves us and will allow circumstances to come into our lives in order to show us what is in our hearts.

At another conference, in Zimbabwe, I told the audience the story of the Ugandan businessman who had lost everything when Idi Amin's soldiers seized his possessions and his family had to flee to the forests. This businessman had peace in his heart only after he forgave the soldiers.

After my morning address, I received a note requesting a private meeting. To my surprise, I found myself sitting across from a couple from Uganda who had been urged by some friends to attend this conference. Deeply disturbed by a tragedy in their own lives, the couple had listened intently to the story of my Ugandan friend.

HOW CAN I FORGIVE?

As they sat before me, they told me how they had struggled to keep their business going in spite of the turbulence of Uganda's last twenty years.

Then one day during the bloody reign of Idi Amin, they received a note stating their twenty-six-year-old son had been kidnapped and was being held for ransom. The parents did nothing for a few days, and then received a note threatening that their son would be killed if they did not pay the ransom.

The couple sought legal advice and consulted with the proper government authorities.

They were advised to resist payment. Then came another note. This was the final warning. If payment was not made immediately, their son would be tortured and killed. As they agonized over what to do, they received a note stating that their son was dead. Grief stricken, the father tried to locate the body.

Finally he found someone who, for a price, would lead him to his son's body. When he arrived at the appointed place late one night, he was seized by a group of soldiers and taken to a prison. In the same cell that had held his son, they stripped him to the waist and made him face a wall. With a whip made of leather strips, they cut his back to ribbons. They loaded him into the back of a pickup truck and dropped him off on a street corner. They shouted at him that if he ever tried to locate his son again, he would be killed.

Two years had passed. The couple had suffered bitter, deep hatred toward unknown soldiers who murdered their son and beat the father until he was unable to lie on his back for two months. They could no longer enjoy success in business, a spacious home in the country, and a happy family life. Now each day was filled with sorrow, hatred, and thoughts of revenge. The story of the Ugandan businessman had disturbed them; they wanted to know if I believed they were wrong to treasure their misery and keep their hatred alive. It seemed to them that resentment was normal and proper. To forgive the soldiers seemed to them to be inappropriate and disloyal to the memory of their son.

What could I say? Theirs was a tragic story. Surely they had the option to choose their own approach to the cruel, heartless event that had clouded their lives. The problem was so far removed from my own life experiences that it seemed almost from another world. I required more wisdom than I possessed. "God, help me," I quietly prayed.

We sat in silence in a dimly lit room. I couldn't think of anything to say to the dear couple. The woman's eyes were filled with tears. The gentleman sat with his elbows on his knees and both hands covering his face. The wife whispered, "It would be a relief to put this behind us and get on with the future." "Yes, it would," he replied. "Can you help us?"

How could I help? I leaned back in my chair and thought to myself, "What would the Ugandan businessman who had lost everything say to them right now? I believe he would have said:

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31-32, NKJV)

Murder and merciless beatings are heinous deeds. Many friends and associates assured them that revenge, anger, and hatred were natural responses. To think of being kind and tenderhearted and forgiving was beyond consideration. Would God want them to change their heart attitudes?

THE HEALING NATURE OF FORGIVENESS

As the three of us struggled in that dark room in Zimbabwe, it seemed to me that there was another presence in the room. God was there telling me to gently urge this dear couple to let go of their hostile spirit and let Him cleanse their hearts. He would give them a kind, tender, forgiving spirit. Jesus would say:

"I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." (Matthew 5:44, NKJV)

I suggested that they needed to pray for such a change of heart, and after a long silence, the man said in a trembling voice, "I am ready." His wife said, "So am I."

The three of us knelt by the bed in that quiet room. I have never heard such moving prayers. We stood up and embraced each other with tears of supernatural joy streaming down our cheeks.

The next day the man and his wife stood before the entire gathering. He told the group that he and his wife were leaving a heavy burden behind and looking forward to a new life in the future. I knew what he meant.

God's children have full access to the limitless supply of the fruit of His Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Isn't it odd, therefore, that we should ever choose hatred, resentment, or anger, not over the great tragedies of life, but, more often over the small grievances of daily living?

Inevitably, my response is involved in a deed that needs my forgiveness. This response forces me into the need for personal examination. If there is anger, hatred, the desire for revenge, or physical attack, then I must deal *with me* before I can deal with the offense. I can get so preoccupied with the offense, I fail to recognize my own need. Jesus once advised a multitude:

"Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? . . . Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:3, 5, NKJV)

To forgive and be forgiven go hand in hand. Therefore, when someone trespasses against us, we usually must deal with our own sins as well as with the other person.

But people want to know when it is acceptable not to forgive. We are confronted on all sides with stories of physical abuse, sexual abuse, rape, unfaithfulness, stealing, suffering, swindling. The list is long. Is no one entitled to withhold forgiveness? Why should we forgive such treatment? The answer is clear.

The Ugandan couple experienced a miraculous cure when they were released from anger and bitterness. Forgiveness freed them from the non-productive and destructive emotions which chained them and enslaved them to the object of their anger. They found that forgiveness was the foundation of good mental health.

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33, NKJV)

Lesson: Forgiving quiets your own heart.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
 - Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
 - What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?
1. What is a pet peeve? A grudge? A feud? What sins describe these three situations?
 2. Does living with the destructive emotions of any of these three situations change the situations?
 3. What does it mean that your sins will not be forgiven if you don't forgive?
 4. Do you feel there are situations where you should not forgive?
 5. Recall a situation where you struggled with letting go of a grudge.
 6. Can you have peace in this world if you harbor a grudge?

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