

INTRODUCTION

NO ONE HAD EVER TALKED TO ME LIKE THAT IN MY LIFE. BUT those words, spoken to me unexpectedly by my friend Josif Tson of Romania, are among the most important words anybody has ever personally shared with me. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov. 27:6, KJV).

The June 5, 2000 issue of London’s *Daily Express* carried an article with this headline: “Can You Learn to Forgive?” It began with the following declaration: “Bearing a grudge can hold you back and even damage your health.”¹ The writer of the article, Susan Pape, had interviewed Dr. Ken Hart, a lecturer at Leeds University who had been running the “world’s first forgiveness course”—a seminar designed to help people forgive their enemies and let go of grudges. Participants ranged from a jilted husband to victims of burglary and bullying. All had one thing in common: They were angry and bitter, and they wanted revenge.

This was not, as far as I know, a Christian course. Evidently it was a case of people doing something



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biblical without even realizing it. It is one indication that the world is starting to recognize the merits of a lifestyle of forgiveness. Unfortunately, Christians may be lagging behind. I myself was one who was unable to forgive for much of my life.

Most of us have times in our lives when we are pushed to our limits as to how much we are called to forgive. I remember what happened to me with such clarity. I have vowed not to retell this story, but suffice it to say I had never been hurt so deeply, before or since. The wrong I believe was done to me affected just about every area of my life: my family, my ministry, my very sense of self-worth. I felt at times like Job when he cried, “I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil” (Job 3:26); or like David when he prayed, “Answer me quickly, O LORD; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit” (Ps. 143:7). I doubt that those who brought this situation upon me had any idea what I went through, and I pray they never will.

I blush to admit that those words from Josif Tson were spoken to me after I became the minister of Westminster Chapel. I, of all people, shouldn’t have needed such a word. Nobody should have had to tell a mature minister of the gospel of Christ the most obvious and fundamental teaching of the New Testament. But there I was in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, filled with so much hurt and bitterness that I could hardly fulfill my duties. I am almost ashamed to confess this, but I share it with you for two reasons: first, to show how gracious God has been to me in spite of my anger and self-pity, and second, to encourage you to walk in forgiveness toward others.

Astonishingly, before the reprimand from my



friend, my unforgiving spirit had not bothered me all that much. If you had reminded me of Jesus' words that we should "love one another" (John 13:35) or of that petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12), I would have replied, "Of course I know about that." I assumed that since nobody is perfect and we all sin in some measure every day, the bitterness in my heart was no worse than any other person's transgression. Moreover, I thought, God fully understood and sympathized with *my* particular circumstances. In other words, I rationalized my attitude and behavior.

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But mercifully, the Holy Spirit spoke to me that day through Josif's words. At first I was angry; I felt hemmed in. But it was a pivotal moment for me, and it changed my life. I was never the same again.

To be honest, I had only told Josif of my problem because I thought I would get sympathy from a man I deeply respected and who I thought would be on my side. I expected him to put his arm on my shoulder and say, "R.T., you are right to feel so angry! Tell me all about it. Get it out of your system."

But no! He compassionately but soberly rebuked me and would not let me off the hook.

Those words came to me during the greatest trial I



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had ever had until that time. I couldn't discuss it with my friends or family members, but because Josif was from Romania and was far removed from the situation, I was able to tell him everything.

"Is that all?" he asked when I finished my story.

"Yes, that's it," I said.

And then came those remarkable words—spoken in his Romanian accent: "You must totally forgive them."

"I can't," I replied.

"You can, and you must," he insisted.

Unsatisfied with his response, I tried to continue. "I just remembered. There *is* more. What I didn't tell you..."

"R.T.," he interrupted, "you must totally forgive them. Release them, and you will be set free."

It was the hardest thing I had ever been asked to do. What I write about in this book is far easier said than done. I repeat, it was the hardest thing I had ever been asked to do, but it was also the greatest thing I had ever been asked to do.

An unexpected blessing emerged as I began to forgive: A peace came into my heart that I hadn't felt in years. It was wonderful. I had forgotten what it was like.

God's peace had come to me years before—on October 31, 1955 when driving my car one Monday morning from my church in Palmer, Tennessee. Readers of my book *The Sensitivity of the Spirit* (Charisma House, 2002) may recall some of the story. I was on my way back from my student pastorate to Trevecca Nazarene College in Nashville. As I drove down the road, I could sense the Lord Jesus literally interceding for me at the right hand of the Father. I had never felt so loved. Jesus was praying for me with all His heart. The next thing I remember—an hour later—was hearing Jesus say to the



Father, “He wants it.” I heard the Father’s voice reply, “He can have it.” At that moment it felt as if liquid fire were entering my chest. I remembered John Wesley’s words, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” I felt an incredible peace that is impossible to describe. The person of Jesus was more real to me than anything or anyone else around me.

This feeling lasted for several months, but eventually I lost it. Now this peace and sense of Jesus’ nearness was beginning to come back—all because I was setting those people free, forgiving them, letting them off the hook.

However, if I allowed myself to think about “what those people did,” I would get churned up inside. I would say to myself, *They are going to get away with this. This is not fair! They won’t get caught. They won’t be found out. Nobody will know. This is not right!* And the sweet peace of the Lord left again.

I began to notice an interesting cycle: When I allowed the spirit of total forgiveness to reign in my heart, the peace would return; but when I would dwell with resentment on the likelihood that they wouldn’t get caught, the peace would leave.

I had to make an important decision: Which do I prefer—the peace or the bitterness? I couldn’t have it both ways. I began to see that I was the one who was losing by nursing my attitude of unforgiveness. My bitterness wasn’t damaging anyone but myself.

When we are bitter, we delude ourselves into thinking that those who hurt us are more likely to be punished as long as we are set on revenge. We are afraid to let go of those feelings. After all, if we don’t make plans to see that justice is done, how will justice be done? We make ourselves believe that it is up to us to



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keep the offense alive.

This is a lie—the devil’s lie. “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19). We only hurt ourselves when we dwell on what has happened to us and fantasize about what it will be like when “they” get punished. Most of all, we grieve the Holy Spirit of God, and this is why we lose our sense of peace.

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I have come to the conclusion that the primary way we grieve the Spirit in our lives is by fostering bitterness in our hearts. I say this because it is the first thing the apostle Paul mentions after warning us not to grieve the Spirit:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

—EPHESIANS 4:30–32

It is also my experience that the quickest way I seem to lose inner peace is when I allow bitterness to



reenter my heart. It's not worth it! I made a decision for inner peace. But I found that I had to carry out that decision by a daily commitment to forgive those who hurt me, and to forgive them totally. I therefore let them utterly off the hook and resigned myself to this knowledge:

- They won't get caught or found out.
- Nobody will ever know what they did.
- They will prosper and be blessed as if they had done no wrong.

What's more, I actually began to will this! I prayed for it to happen. I asked God to forgive them. But I have had to do this every day to keep the peace within my heart. Having been on both sides, I can tell you: The peace is better. The bitterness isn't worth it.

I write this book to encourage anyone who has had a problem with forgiving those who have hurt them, however deeply. I write this to help such people see the real reasons to forgive. Many people who read this book will have been through far worse than what I have experienced. But I have come to believe that the only way to move beyond the hurt and go forward in life is through total forgiveness. My prayer is that this book will change lives as my own was changed by Josif's loving rebuke.

I am convinced that this theme of total forgiveness is perhaps more crucially needed at this present moment than nearly any other teaching in the Bible. I say that for a number of reasons. First, whenever I preach the message of total forgiveness, there is a tremendous response. No sermon or theme I *ever* touch on comes close to the chord that is struck when I share on this subject. The response tells me that there is a terrific



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need for this message—even among Christians.

Second, when I return to this theme in my own church, even if I taught on it only a few weeks before, people respond as if they have never heard the message! This matter of getting rid of bitterness and totally forgiving one another is difficult to deal with. I sometimes think it would be good if I preached this message every week!

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Third, it is evident that I myself never felt sufficiently bothered by the unforgiveness I was harboring in my heart. Why? I have asked this question many times. I surely knew that this was Jesus' message. So why was I not gripped by my need to forgive? Why did I need the reprimand of a man who had lived behind the Iron Curtain? Did the Christians in Eastern Europe have an understanding of forgiveness that we in the West did not? Why do we not emphasize this message in our society?

I have read hundreds of sermons by the Puritans and the Reformers, but I cannot recall being told by them I must totally forgive or otherwise grieve the Holy Spirit. Godly though my own parents were, I cannot say this was something I was consciously taught at home. Not a single mentor that I can recall emphasized this as a lifestyle. On the contrary, I can remember being told: "Treat them with contempt." "Distance yourself from



them.” “Give them a cold shoulder.” “Teach them a lesson.” “They must be punished.” Or other suggestions of that sort.

A fourth reason that the message of forgiveness is so timely in our day is that a growing number of informed people have recently discerned the need for further teaching on the subject. In a recent issue of *Christianity Today* with the bold words “The Forgiveness Factor” emblazoned across the front cover, writer Gary Thomas reckons that this teaching has been greatly overlooked. Thomas cites theologian Lewis Smedes as one of the first to emphasize this—in 1984! Professor Robert Enright, president of the International Forgiveness Institute, who describes himself as an “evangelical Catholic,” has commented that prior to Lewis Smedes’ *Forgive and Forget* (1984), “If you collected every theological book about person-to-person forgiveness [as opposed to divine-human forgiveness], you could hold them all in one hand.”² If this is true, although it doesn’t excuse my attitude, it would help explain my own lack of awareness.

Some people marvel that a doctrine that seems so obvious in Scripture could apparently lie dormant, untaught for hundreds of years. But this should cause those of us who are church leaders to repent, not only for neglecting to teach forgiveness, but also for not putting it into practice in our own lives. Had this teaching been the emphasis and lifestyle of all of us who are in church leadership, there might not have been the division, hurt and strife that has characterized many Christian circles. Though these strivings may often be described as a doctrinal battle for truth, so often the veneer is paper-thin and underneath are the age-old jealousies, petty agendas and sheer humanness that affect us all.



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Fifth, social scientists are discovering that forgiveness may help lead to victims' emotional and even physical healing and wholeness. As recently as the early 1980s, Dr. Glen Mack Harnden went to the University of Kansas library and looked up the word *forgiveness* in *Psychological Abstracts*. He couldn't find a single reference. But things are changing. Former President Jimmy Carter, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former missionary Elisabeth Elliot have been promoting a \$10 million "Campaign for Forgiveness Research," established as a non-profit corporation to attract donations that will support forgiveness research proposals. In 1998 the John Templeton Foundation awarded research grants for the study of forgiveness to twenty-nine scholars,³ and one of the primary discoveries of these studies is that the person who gains the most from forgiveness is the person who does the forgiving. Should this surprise us?

Although forgiveness has positive psychological—and even physical—benefits, this book is not about the results of psychological or sociological research. It is wholly about biblical teaching—about the spiritual blessing that comes to those who take Jesus' teaching of total forgiveness seriously. In a word, it is about receiving a greater anointing.

Because forgiving those who have hurt us severely can be a very difficult task—especially when trust is shattered—Michelle Nelson has chosen to speak of degrees, or different types, of forgiveness.⁴ She has listed three categories:

1. *Detached forgiveness*—Where there is a reduction in negative feelings toward the offender, but no reconciliation takes place.



2. *Limited forgiveness*—Where there is a reduction in negative feelings toward the offender and the relationship is partially restored, though there is a decrease in the emotional intensity of the relationship.
3. *Full forgiveness*—Where there is a total cessation of negative feelings toward the offender, and the relationship is fully restored.

I have chosen to speak of “total forgiveness,” if only because that is the expression my friend Josif Tson used with me. But this book is also about total forgiveness *even if there is not a restoration of the relationship*. One must totally forgive those who will not be reconciled.

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Even if there is no reconciliation, there can still be total forgiveness. This may even apply to the forgiveness of those who are no longer alive. This forgiveness must happen in the heart, and when it does, peace emerges—with or without a complete restoration in the relationship. What matters is that the Holy Spirit is able to dwell in us *ungrieved*, able to be utterly Himself. The degree to which the Holy Spirit is Himself in me will be the degree to which I am like Jesus and carry out His teachings.