

FAITH AND FORGIVENESS

Faith and forgiveness is found in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). In Jesus' mind disciples must live a life that corresponds to what they have received from God. Few of His stories end with a specific application, but in this case Jesus provides His own clarification to Matt. 18:21-35, The parable of the unforgiving servant, "So my heavenly Father will also do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Those who abuse God's forgiveness, who have not been affected by its power, prove in their own lives that they do not understand what it means to be forgiven.

I began speaking about how common revenge was in Jesus' world. The same is true of the Middle East today. These cultural values have remained constant for two thousand years. But within this honor-protecting culture, there are astonishing opportunities for forgiveness.

Lebanon has witnessed over thirty-five years of breathtaking violence. Civil war (1975 – 1990), invasion and occupation by Israel (1982), occupation by Syria (1990), and a recent devastating war with Israel (2006) has all but destroyed what was once the "Paris of the Middle East." This country understands war.

During the chaos of the fighting in the 1980s, many villages were attacked by rival militias. In one village in the south, a Druze militia attacked a Christian village and massacred countless people. One eighteen-year-old girl named Mary lost thirty three family members in one day. When Mary saw the killing, she fled the village desperate to get away. Druze soldiers gave chase, she fell, and one of them was on her immediately. A young man aimed a gun at Mary's face and simply said, "Renounce the cross or die." Mary responded, "I am a Christian and I will die a Christian." The gun fired and the bullet passed through her jaw and out her neck, destroying her spine. She was instantly a quadriplegic. The soldier then took out his knife and carved a cross on her chest – and left her to die.

The next day, the Druze soldiers wanted to take over the village completely. They collected the bodies, created a large pile, and awaited orders. Then one man heard a voice, the voice of Mary, whimpering from the body pile. Mary was removed, taken to a hospital, and given medical treatment.

Today Mary lives in a Lebanese home for the paralyzed. She has a little movement in her right arm, but all else has been lost. She paints watercolors and often give them away to visiting strangers.

Bob Seiple (who told me this story) visited Mary while he was the president of World Vision. The story overwhelmed him. "How do you handle this?" he asked her. "How do you live?"

Mary answered Bob. "I have forgiven my enemies because Christ has forgiven me. And I am looking for the man who hurt me so I can tell him I forgave him.

Bob will tell you he has never been the same since that conversation. If forgiveness and mercy are possible for a woman like Mary, it is possible for each one of us. Through her forgiveness, she has been set free – free of anger, free to live without dreams of revenge and reprisal.

Extending God's grace – a grace we have already received – to others is the foremost hallmark of Christian identity. And if we take Jesus at His word here, it is deeply important to Him.

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