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Teach Me to Forgive - Chapter 7 from "Divine Secrets of Mentoring: Spiritual Growth Through Friendship"

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Teach Me to Forgive

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The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

JOHN 8:3-8

THE ADULTERESS'S STORY

It has been four years and still the nightmares wake him. My little boy is growing now into the body of a man and he continues to wake, screaming for his mother, terrified of the stones that never flew. My poor child, haunted by a mother's guilt and the angry righteousness of guilty men.

My sin is a nightmare we continue to live with daily. Everyone knows. Everyone. It is easy to see which young girl has just been told my story. She blushes when her eyes meet mine. Imagine, an adulter-

ess, right here in the village. Caught in the act . . . that is the piece that sends their imagination winging and their blush deepening.

It is not as if we planned adultery. My husband was dead. A drunkard—it was hard to grieve him. I wore the clothes of a widow, kept the religious customs of widowhood, but my heart did not conform. I was grateful that he was gone. Grateful that my children and I would never again work to hide bruises that were the results of his love affair with drink. Grateful that he could no longer hurt us.

So, when Thomas returned to town, returned with an invalid wife, it is small wonder that my heart began to pound. He had been my playmate as a child, my eight-year-old defender. He had begged Father to allow him to marry me, but Father saw only the money my husband had to offer as a bride price. Thomas could not match the cash. But fifteen years after my marriage, Thomas returned.

Thomas.

Handsome to my eyes. Smiling a smile that was as familiar to me as my mother's. Laughing, cajoling, understanding. Thomas, twin to my soul.

We did not set out to commit adultery. We were circumspect at first. If he had not known me so well, known my expressions. If we had not moved close enough to touch. . . . Well, it is finished. We did know each other well; we did touch.

They dragged me before another religious teacher. My four children looked on, sobbing in fear. I longed to comfort them. What kind of mother risks her children's future for the love of an old friend? What kind of mother was I? What kind of mother am I?

The teacher seemed uninterested. I was just another sinner. One more caught in the net. One more destined for the pit outside town. And all the while I begged God to send someone to take my children. Someone to shield their eyes.

The teacher bent down and began to write in the dirt. I cannot

read. I did not know what he was writing. Glancing around, I realized that the teachers of the law had fallen silent. Many of the older ones were flushed. A red stain crept up their faces. And still the teacher wrote.

Then the younger men were looking away. I searched the horizon, wondering what they were looking at—or for. What had the teacher written?

“If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her,” Jesus said.

One by one the rocks dropped to the ground. But this one, this Jesus—even if all the others turned away, surely this man could throw a rock. Surely he was without sin.

Standing, Jesus addressed me. “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” I answered. The children drew close. Our tears streamed as one. My littlest, Jonah, seven years old, sobbed and hiccupped behind me.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus said. “Go now, and leave your life of sin.”

I could not believe my ears. How could this man forgive me? How could he allow me to go? I wiped my cheeks with the heels of my hands. “I can go? You forgive me?” I asked.

The teacher smiled. It was a kind smile. I began to wonder: Did he somehow know it all—Thomas, the bride price? Did he know the whole, complicated mess? He nodded toward my children, his voice kind. “Go, woman. Sin no more.”

So my life was spared, but my children, especially poor little Jonah, will never be the same. He is haunted by my sin and the leaders holding stones in their hands. He is terrified and I cannot soothe him.

I feel bitter about those old men in their religious robes. They were not without sin. They only stopped because Jesus wrote in the dirt.

Whatever he wrote, he reminded them of their own sin. Those old men mock me; they sneer in disgust. They sigh and pick up their robes lest our common dirt contaminate them.

And still the voice of Jesus lingers in my ears: "If anyone is without sin . . ." "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." His teaching can be so hard. I must forgive my prosecutors? I must forgive those men who shielded Thomas yet pushed my children to the front to observe their mother's shame? How can I forgive someone who has not asked for forgiveness? People whose very presence terrifies my child?

And yet, Jesus forgave me. He spared my life. No, those old men in their religious robes hold no fear for me. It is Jesus who haunts my dreams, begging me to forgive.

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LEARNING TO FORGIVE

Forgiveness is the lesson that separates the serious followers of Jesus from the wannabees. It is the most difficult lesson of all, one we are taught from the cross of Christ. In my own journey, the Lord had me work on confession for two solid years before he began the truly difficult work of teaching me the deep lessons of forgiveness. When it was time to learn, he again enlisted the help of that circle of women who had mentored and nurtured me throughout my young adulthood.

As a child I had learned how to mouth the words of forgiveness. I had learned how to forgive my sister for playing with my dolls. I had learned how to put on a pious face to fool my mother. I had not learned how to truly forgive.

As a young adult, I had layers of hurts and resentments in my life. I was bitterly angry over some of those hurts, and forgiveness was the furthest thing from my mind and my heart. For me, forgiveness

sounded horribly vulnerable. I was interested in self-preservation, not forgiving.

Enter the sisterhood of believers—kind, compassionate women who saw a caged animal and determined to set it free. These women knew and understood that I preferred the cage of resentment and hurt to freedom. They had lived in cages themselves and knew that the freedom of forgiveness, the freedom of a self held captive by the gospel, is always preferable to the cage of self-preservation.

My sisters had a lesson for me, a lesson I was not terribly interested in learning. At this point in my life, I had just spent two years learning to live in a state of daily confession. If I had put all of that enormous spiritual and psychological effort into learning confession, it was high time the rest of the church caught up. I wasn't about to learn forgiveness until they learned confession. Self-preservation sounded essential to me. Forgiveness sounded terrifying.

I had been in an intense study of the Word for almost a year when my mentors recommended that I pray and fast, asking the Lord for a list of the people whom I needed to forgive. I did not think much of their assignment. I avoided it. I learned to respond with carefully chosen words that sounded like I was moving right along when I was actually at a dead, full stop. In other words, I lied. I avoided them and I avoided Jesus. Like the woman caught in adultery, I was haunted by Jesus' command to forgive. I tried desperately to forget that command.

THE CHURCH

At this point, Mark and I had spent four long years in a church that viewed women as nursery workers and kitchen attendants. These restrictive roles for women had been formed by centuries of believers who took literally Paul's command for women to learn in silence. I was allowed to partner with my husband in running children's ministries, but it was Mark they would listen to.

I had groaned often under the weight of these restrictions. This church did not know what to make of Genesis 1—"in the image of God . . . male and female he created them." Yet God had called us there.

It was an ongoing private pain for me and occasionally a public pain for both Mark and me. In our position as head of children's ministries, Mark and I were given full access to the elder board. We found that my ideas, my visions, were best expressed through Mark. If he articulated my ideas, the men on the board found them easier to assimilate. They paid closer attention when Mark spoke. This wounded me deeply. I often awoke with tears on my cheeks, my spirit torn.

For years our elder board had stated publicly that they wanted to see women use the gifts God had given them, and they were disappointed to see a lack of response. They wanted women to be active in the life of the church, but found women less and less willing to participate in those silent roles assigned to them by custom. They did not understand that their own view of women kept many from participating.

Those men loved the women of our church—not perfectly, but sincerely and faithfully. They wished I was not hurting, that none of us were hurting. They too wanted healing for the body of Christ. That January, our elder board took action. They called on an elder from a church back east, a close friend of our pastor, and invited him to come in late January and teach for three days on the role of women in the church.

Hearing that a man was being summoned to teach women their place, I struggled with a choice: rebellion or reform? Is my anger righteous indignation that will lead to reform, or is it rebellion? Like most powerful moves of God, reform has a counterfeit. It can be hard to tell which is which. At some point in the struggle it occurred to me: *What if this man, this male, is sent from God?* With that thought, I moved as quickly as I could from frustration to prayer: "Lord, what is your will in all of this?"

THE SISTERS

The next night I returned to my Bible study group. There my kind, wonderful sisters were eager to talk it out. They were willing to listen to all of me—the anger and frustration, the prayers, the questions about my own heart.

In this small group, not everyone shared my convictions about women. Two were content with the way things were and wondered what the fuss was all about. One was as immersed in the fuss as I was. But the issue did not separate us. They loved me, right or wrong, pure or fallen, rebelling or reforming. And in that atmosphere of love I was free to grow, free to work through this deepest hurt.

We agreed that I would spend the next week chronicling my hurts. We had learned the importance of looking honestly at hurts—looking, analyzing, confessing, repenting and forgiving on a daily basis. I was able to forgive small hurts, but these were deep aches I was nursing.

These sisters of mine were determined. Regardless of the pain involved, I was to look at this carefully guarded area of my life involving women in the church. I would look, analyze, confess my own sin, repent of my sin and forgive those others at fault. Surrounded by a trinity of strong, loving women, I had no out. I had to do my work. Like the woman taken in adultery, I would need to forgive just as I had been forgiven.

The week zoomed by. I wrote and wrote and wrote. The morning of the seminar, I finished my homework: twenty-plus pages of pain. Only then did the Spirit of God come and make himself known, whispering to me, “Now we will begin the process of restoration.” Wonderful words of life! Restoration! Restore me! My spirit sang out the words in trusting abandon.

RESTORATION BEGINS WITH FORGIVENESS

The three-day seminar was filled with joy. The teacher affirmed both

males and females. He saw both as having God-given attributes that are needed in the body of Christ. He honored all. I do not know if our elders were surprised by his teaching. They exchanged smiles occasionally but made no public comment. Nor did the basic structure of the church change. It was only the beginning, the spark that could be seen in many individual faces.

Mark and I were instructed, affirmed and encouraged by his teaching, and by Sunday morning we were beaming. But for me the smile had a strange counterpart. Somewhere deep inside me, I was angry. Why? Why, when a wonderful teacher had affirmed the dignity of women and honored women for three straight days?

As the service ended, the teacher was praying over individuals. My sisters came and found me unsettled. They empathized, putting loving arms around me. No one had an answer for my bewildering emotions. Finally I joined the line of those needing prayer. When the teacher reached me, I explained that I was angry. His answer was immediate and painfully clear: "You need to forgive."

I was aghast. *Forgive? Twenty-plus pages of grief and I need to forgive? No, dear brother! They need to repent.*

Silently we viewed each other. He was well aware of my hesitation. "Let's do it now. Put an end to it today," he said, smiling encouragement. I liked this man. I liked him a lot. He was cut from the same fine cloth as my husband and my father. I didn't want to disappoint him. And unlike my circle of sisters—sympathetic to the end—this man was demanding that we conquer the problem.

"Okay," I said, hardly aware of the decision being made. "Lord, help me to forgive—"

He interrupted. "Nope." I had never been interrupted in prayer. My eyes asked the question. "You don't need help," he explained. "You need to forgive. Take another stab at it." His hand rested on my shoulder. I felt like a high jumper getting instructions from the coach.

Nodding, I returned to the work. "Lord, I need to forgive—" "Nope."

The interruptions were beginning to unnerve me. *Who is this man and what does he want from me?* I glanced up to find tender eyes watching me. His person was reflecting clearly the Lord I love so much. "Okay. I'm not getting it," I admitted. "What am I doing wrong?"

He smiled. "You don't want to, need to or require help to forgive. You need to state, simply, that you *do* forgive."

"Umm . . ." This man, directed by my Lord, meant business. There would be no nice escape. The poison of anger, bitterness and resentment was going to be removed or I would have to admit that I wanted to keep them as companions—and hang forgiveness. The choice was mine.

"Right," I stammered, feeling the emotions tighten my throat and blur my vision.

"Let's nail it," he said, ever the coach, determined to get the athlete over the high bar.

I braced myself and finally began my trek down the track. "Lord, I have not forgiven as you forgave." The pat on my shoulder assured me that I was on my way. No interruptions this round. "Lord, I forgive . . ." The names rolled off my tongue and released me from my tomb. Stones of unforgiveness, blocking the light, were removed. The clear bright light of resurrection grew visible at a distance.

As I finished, the teacher/coach took over. "Lord, I stand as her witness, that on this day, she did indeed forgive these sins committed against her. Whenever the enemy would try to get her to recall them, to embrace them, to make them residents in her life, remind her of this day. You and I are witnesses to her work."

The work of forgiveness was complete. His words removed the temptation to disavow the work of God in my life. From that day forward, I had a witness who would stand with me, or testify against me

should I deny the work of God in my life, should I try to reclaim the anger and the bitterness. What a mentor! What a lesson!

THE LESSON

I had no idea that forgiveness would be part of the restoring of my soul. Yet forgiveness brought me back to a place of purity. I felt clean inside. I had never before understood the entrapping power of failing to forgive or the profound peace that comes with forgiving.

The placement of this lesson in my adult life was no mistake. It followed two years of being asked by God to learn to live in a daily state of confession. Finally confession had more or less become a habit. Now I needed to study forgiveness.

Why had God asked me to focus on confession first? A powerful statement from A. Boyce Gibson helped me understand: “The only people who can be trusted with forgiveness are those who at the same time acknowledge their solidarity in sin with the forgiven. Otherwise, forgiveness, like justice, is an instrument of oppression.”

First I needed to know, deep in my bones, that I am a sinner. I am firmly entrenched in a fallen world as a fallen individual in need of the daily saving power of Jesus Christ. Then the logical step was learning to forgive. Once I was convinced of my own sin, forgiveness withheld would have been blasphemy.

My head understood the logic. My heart cried out for easier lessons.

FORGIVE US AS WE FORGIVE

It was just weeks later that I heard Father Richard Treadwell speak on Matthew 6:12: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” He talked about his own problems with that verse—how his flesh wants to see the bad guys get what’s coming to them, how he never wishes the same punishment on himself. Then he went on

to say, "Our sins are forgiven with the same energy and thoroughness that we forgive others."

Stop the sermon. Obviously Treadwell's seminary wasn't kosher. Someone had taught him wrong. I am forgiven. What is this nonsense about only being forgiven with the same energy and thoroughness that I forgive others? That's not in the Bible. Not in my version.

I went home disgruntled. Then the quiet voice of a sister came. Having been raised Catholic, Wendy said, "Why don't you let the whole thing rest for a few days. Just say the Lord's Prayer over and over. Pretend you are a good Catholic." I could hear the amusement in her voice.

"Just the Lord's Prayer?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Give yourself a rest. Bathe yourself in prayer, the prayer Jesus used to teach us to pray."

It sounded good to me. And so I began, day after day, over and over. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The line stood out in stark relief. Just what had Jesus meant? Wasn't it just that I was to put forth a good effort every so often? I returned to my Bible to find out. Matthew wrote, "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" (6:14-15). Ouch.

My forgiveness is conditional on my willingness to forgive others. Not just willingness—active forgiveness. These verses made me most uncomfortable. They erased my picture of a "say these words and everything is cool" type of God. My God, Jesus his Son, was commanding forgiveness.

I looked further into Scripture. Mark 11:25 was crystal clear: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Luke 6:37 reads, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not con-

demn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." If anything, the teachings of Jesus were becoming progressively harder.

I began to wonder if he had read the headlines of the *Oregonian* lately. Did he understand the sins of the twenty-first century: sexual abuse, date rape, insider trading, serial killing? Did he understand what it was like to be a mother in this crazy society? Did he know the fear?

I went on to the next reference in my concordance, Luke 23:33-34: "When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots."

Suffering an unbelievably cruel death, Jesus who knew no sin forgave his murderers as they gambled for his clothes. His mother was there. He knew her pain. It added untold weight to his own.

This picture forever destroyed my comfortable picture of Christianity. It also destroyed my newfound reason to forgive: forgive to be forgiven. It had seemed logical. It had begun to make sense—until I came to the place of the Skull, until I viewed my Lord hanging on raw lumber, gasping for breath yet pushing out words of forgiveness. He knew no sin. He had no real reason to forgive, no *quid pro quo* to satisfy.

New to the paths of forgiveness, my spirit rebelled. I did not like the Christ-established model. I wanted better bookkeeping. Can you understand the careful bookkeeping I was looking for? It is a matter of other people acknowledging the devastation that their sin has caused while I call mine a "white lie." It means that there were valid reasons for my misconduct, while others were guilty of malicious sin. It means that my sin was minor and another's sin was the nail that pierced my Savior's hand.

Jesus has ways of dealing with bookkeepers. He let me run through all my mazes, play intellectual games, justify, rationalize, downplay my own involvement. Then, when my spirit was finally quiet, he gave me a mental picture. It was a picture of him. Jesus came into my room, sat down on a kitchen stool and turned his back to me. Slowly, seriously, he removed the white shirt he wore. There, before my unhappy eyes, was his battered back, crisscrossed with the lashings of a Roman military unit. Puffy, red scar tissue. The lashings meshed together, one large disfiguring mass.

He beckoned me to touch it. Hesitantly, gently, my fingers traced the scars. My hands trembled and the teeth that clenched my lower lip would not relax.

"Now," he said, his eyes serious and kind, "show me which ones are yours."

As long as I live, I will not forget the day or the picture. My sins. Meshed with all of humanity's. Impossible to separate. Impossible to ignore. Now that battered back stands as a bond between me and my brothers and sisters. No individual sin is discernible. All are guilty.

And the tenderness of Jesus' eyes remains with me also. Forgiveness is forever etched on his back. Love continually shines forth from his eyes. Who am I to deny either?

THE HARSH AND HEALING REALITY

I learned the harsh and healing reality of forgiveness when I was teaching a Bible study. It was a warm August evening and I had taught the group my own lesson of forgiveness. It was a good lesson; the women were moved and the presence of the Lord graced our living room. I finished with my best illustration, paused and closed my Bible, intending to pray.

"Carol?" a small voice asked. I looked up to see Grace. She is not quite five feet tall, entering her fifties, struggling with weight prob-

lems. Grace seldom spoke in our class. If she had a question, I was more than happy to hear it.

“Yes?”

“Well, Carol, I like what you have to say and all, but sometimes you can’t always forgive people when they are alive.”

I watched Grace carefully. She sat very still, head bowed, hands clenched. Her feet barely reached the floor. Her statement left me in a quandary. When you are the youngest woman in the room and also the teacher, you learn quickly to embrace silence and listen to experience. I did not want my lesson watered down, but I did want Grace to have a safe place to speak, to share her own stories, something she had not yet done.

“Can you explain for us?” I asked. Grace’s head slowly rose. Her eyes met mine. “Yes, I can explain,” she said. The room was silent. Each one wanted to hear her story, and each one was forever changed by the story we heard.

“I was the youngest of ten children,” she began. “My oldest sister was twenty-three when I was born. I had nephews and nieces older than me.

“My father hated women. He used to say, ‘All women are whores, boys; that’s what they’re made for.’ This is how he instructed my brothers. From the time I was five until my menstrual cycle started at ten, my brothers sexually abused me.” The living room was deathly still. The Kleenex box began its trek around the silent circle.

“When I was little, I used to hide under the dining room table. It had a long tablecloth on it and I felt safe there. I learned to count the big feet as they went by so I would know when it was safe to come out. My parents did nothing to protect us. My sister and I told my mother. She did nothing. We had no door on our bedroom. Even a door would have helped us. But they did nothing.

“My father died when I was seventeen. I did not grieve.

“As an adult, I finally found Jesus. He began to heal me,” her voice wavered for the first time. Several pairs of hands reached out to squeeze hers. Struggling, she went on. “I felt like a tramp. You see, I too had learned my father’s lesson well.

“My coming to Jesus had all kinds of miracles attached to it. At every step, he assured me that I was clean. Not a tramp, but a daughter. Not a whore, but a bride.

“Eventually, as I neared forty, I knew I had to do something about my anger. Jesus had answered my prayer. He had allowed me to see myself in the mirror of another person. A person filled with anger. I did not like what I saw. I would have to allow him to be Lord in this area too.

“So I decided to forgive my father and brothers. I had moved two thousand miles from home. It was time to go back. My sister and I visited home for a relative’s wedding. I made a list of all Dad’s wrongs. Then I borrowed a car and drove to the cemetery where Dad was buried. Kneeling by the grave, I used my fingers to dig up a small patch of ground. I buried my father’s sins with him and left them there.

“I had been so angry. Now the anger was gone. It didn’t own me. Kneeling by the grave, I said, ‘There, Dad. It’s done.’ Two strong hands gripped my shoulders and pulled me up. Amazingly, a priest had come. He was not someone I knew and no one knew where I was. Only God could have sent him.

“This kind priest put his arms around me and said, ‘You’re right. It is done. It’s over. Leave it there.’ I turned back to the grave, encouraged by this kind man of God. ‘It’s over, Daddy. It’s all done. I forgive you.’

“I turned around to thank the priest, but he was gone. I stood up and looked around, but I could not see him anywhere.”

“What do you mean?” one woman asked.

“I mean, the priest had disappeared. Into thin air. Gone,” Grace

said with a smile. "But not before his work was done. You see, I couldn't forgive my father when he was alive because he did not want to be forgiven and I did not want to forgive. Once I met Jesus, and Jesus was so good, I had to forgive."

Shaky smiles filled my living room. Yes, once you meet Jesus, and Jesus is so good, you have to forgive. You have to do anything your Lord commands. Meeting Jesus. Seeing the goodness. Forgiveness made easier. Forgiveness made real. Forgiveness brought by the true High Priest.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Who has taught you lessons of forgiveness? What lessons in forgiving have you learned that you could pass on?
2. Receiving forgiveness from God for our own sins comes with a responsibility. Read the following verses and explain the believer's responsibility to forgive.
 - Matthew 6:12, 14
 - Mark 11:25
 - Luke 6:37
3. Spend some moments in prayerful meditation. Who are the people you have refused to forgive? Are there areas of your own life that feel unforgiven? Take a few moments, and in prayer, forgive.