

### A bible study on forgiveness:

The country I come from bears the testimony that people live in prisons. Everyone is trapped behind electric fences, burglar bars and big dogs. When I was working as an evangelist, a few years ago, going from door to door talking to people, I sometimes felt I was taking my life in my own hands to try and get to the porch of some houses. One time I got stuck in a rosebush, while a dog was attacking me. Praise God that I could defend myself, but still had to go and see a doctor. The other time I just entered the gate when two vicious dogs came around the back. With the speed of light I turned around and cleared the gate with one jump.

Irrespective of this, people still testify that many of us have a higher quality of life than many in Northern and Western Europe. Why is that? The reason is 'We are not prisoners of circumstances, but prisoners of our attitude'. Such a prison is the inability to forgive. Nothing ignites and inflates bitterness more than the inability to forgive. Not able to forgive, through bitterness, sucks us dry like an used orange, like anorexia that sucks the life out of the most beautiful model to only dump her in obscurity.

The saddest thing is that this anorexia does not harm the guilty one, only the victim. It is only the victim that turns bitter and are being stripped of human dignity, joy and meaning of life. The culprit stays at large and don't even know or care what happened. This is the secret about forgiving, "It is not about others, it is about ourselves". We don't forgive, in the first place, to free the perpetrator, but to free ourselves. In this God is our example:

*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (Matthew 5:44-46 RSV)*

God does good to even those who curse his name, those that persecute his children, those that destroy his creation etc. God knows how not to become bitter at a world that rejects him. God knows that the secret is in forgiving. Jesus said on the cross, to those that put him through the most inhumane suffering imaginable:

*Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing." (Luke 23:34 The Message)*

In Matthew 5:44-46 (as quoted above) Jesus says “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven”. Our willingness to forgive then has an impact on our salvation. I'm not taking this lightly. I know that going through a horrible ordeal, like sexual abuse or rape, leaves deep scars and forgiving is not easy. On the other hand, salvation is not easy. To be exact, humanly impossible. So, just as salvations begs for grace, so forgiving is not possible without grace. We read in Matthew 19:25-26:

*The disciples were astounded. "Then who in the world can be saved?" they asked. Jesus looked at them intently and said, "**Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible.**"* (New Living Translation)

Forgiving has to be taken seriously. Firstly, because we are created in the image of God, and when we are robbed of meaning and joy, God suffers. Secondly, if we don't forgive, God has a problem forgiving us:

*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.*  
(Matthew 6:14-15 NIV)

Forgiving and healing are synonymous words in the Gospels. When we forgive God heals. So if forgiveness is too great a demand yet, seek healing.

#### Driving it home:

1. How would you define bitterness?
2. Has bitterness taken root in your life?
3. Are you in peace with everyone you know?
4. What does it mean to beg God for grace?