

How to Help Abuse Victims Spiritually

by Diane Stelling

I am fond of telling people that Christians are in the “forgiveness business.” We realize how undeservedly we receive God’s grace and mercy and we want to share that forgiveness with others. When people reveal their burdens to us we have a tendency to offer them the forgiveness of Jesus, and we also encourage people to extend forgiveness to those they encounter who might need it, especially those who have wronged them.

Sometimes, however, in this zeal to promote forgiveness, Christians become judgmental of their fellow Christians and tend to view forgiveness in black and white terms. Those who can willingly and instantaneously forgive are looked upon favorably, whereas those who are not ready to forgive, or who have some questions about the process, are thought to be either unforgiving or somehow lacking in their faith. They are viewed as just not “there” yet, not quite mature in their Christianity.

The most important thing Christians can do to help abuse victims spiritually is to rethink how to apply their Christian principles regarding forgiveness to abuse situations, and to consciously become nonjudgmental of victims.

As an abuse survivor myself, I attended church as an adult for many years and never felt better or relieved. In fact, I would return home from worship emotionally confused, and with a very uncomfortable feeling about my self-worth. As a child, my abusers always told me that the punishment I received was brought on by me and if I behaved better it would stop. After hearing this day in and day out for years, I truly believed that I was the cause of my own abuse. I felt as if I was a very bad person, someone who needed punishment and needed forgiveness for being so bad.

When I went to church, I would hear sermons about being forgiven for my sins. During Bible studies and discussions, people would reveal their different personal problems and be told by well-meaning Christians over and over again that Jesus forgives them. I, like many other victims, was too ashamed to ever reveal my abuse to anyone, for fear that I would not be believed, and that I would be judged and rejected as unlovable by those around me, not only for being bad enough to cause the abuse, but also for revealing it.

I internalized the messages of forgiveness, however, and this negatively reinforced for me what I had been told by my abusers. It did not make me feel better; it made me feel worse. If Jesus was willing to forgive me, then it must be true. I must have sinned and been the cause of the abuse. The only reason Jesus would need to forgive me was if I had done something for which I needed to be forgiven. Throughout all of this time, however, there was a little voice inside of me that kept asking “Forgiven for *what*? What did I do?”

Finally, through God’s Word, I learned that the abuse was not my fault, that God sees the purity of my heart and not the outward taint of the abuse, and that I do not need to be forgiven for

that. God knows that the impure hearts and thoughts belong to my abusers. The knowledge of my innocence in the eyes of God regarding my abuse finally freed me from a lifetime burden of a sin that was not mine. The sin of the abuse and the responsibility for that sin belong to my abusers.

I cannot stress strongly enough the need to tell abuse victims that they are innocent in God's eyes regarding their abuse. Not that they are forgiven, but that they are innocent. Offering victims forgiveness keeps them in a cycle of self-hatred, but offering them the knowledge of their innocence can be the starting point in their journey towards healing.

The second most important thing we can do as Christians is to remember that forgiveness is a process. When abuse is revealed, there is usually a strong emphasis by Christians to try to encourage the victim to forgive their abuser. Because of their abuse, victims come for help fully burdened and feeling like they cannot measure up, that they cannot live up to other's expectations of them. Implying that they should work towards forgiveness imposes an additional stress on victims, especially if they do not feel ready to offer forgiveness. It sets them up once again to feel like they are failing God and not living up to what a "good" Christian should be able to do.

When a death occurs in someone's family, we recognize that family members go through a grieving process, and that this is a very individual thing. Some people recover quickly, others more slowly, while still others never get past the loss. As Christians we have learned, however, that we need to give the grieving person time and space to work through this process, and that it will occur in God's timeframe, not ours. We wish to see them through this process so that they can once again enjoy life, but ultimately, whether or not the person is able to process the loss and move on in their lives does not impact their worth or value as a Christian.

What we need to understand is that in order for abuse victims to work through the forgiveness process, they, too, must go through a grieving process. Before they can truly "let go," victims of abuse need to mourn what they lost because of the abuse, whether it is their childhood, their marriage, or relationships with parents, spouses, siblings, children, other relatives or friends. As with any grieving, this is a painful process, and some are more successful at it than others. So the way in which we can be most helpful is to compassionately walk beside victims as they go through this process, not imposing any "shoulds," but affording them the time and space to work through forgiveness by allowing God's healing presence in their lives. And if the outcome is not as we desire, we need to recognize that this does not make victims any less Christian than anyone else.

If every Christian in every congregation remembered and applied these two points, that victims need to hear they are innocent in the eyes of God regarding their abuse and that forgiveness is a process and we should not judge victims' abilities to forgive their abusers, churches would become the safe havens they should be for abuse victims to receive spiritual help and healing.