

# SALT IS GOOD

## *Forgiveness and Moral Education*

BY LOURDES E. MORALES-GUDMUNDSSON

**“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?”**

(Luke 14:34, NIV).<sup>1</sup>

**I**n Luke 14, Jesus uses the symbol of salt to refer to that profound moral quality that distinguishes Christians from the world around them. Salt in the ancient world was a symbol of endurance and value and was often used in worship or in the making of covenants. In the New Testament, salt carries the meaning of moral worth in a person (Luke 14:34, 35) or in one’s speech (Colossians. 4:6).<sup>2</sup> To lose one’s saltiness is to lose one’s moral compass.

Much of what steals the peace of hu-

man beings is related to immorality. Not just rape, adultery, and murder, but white-collar cheating, intentional cruelty, and actions that diminish another’s worth. How does Adventist education address immorality? Are occasional condemnations of sin in a Bible class enough? How can we incorporate moral education in everything we do as educators? In this article, I will use the moral quality of forgiveness as an example of one way that peace-promoting moral values can be taught in the Christian university.

### **Peace and the University Campus**

On April 16, 2007, the same day that Virginia Tech English major Seung-Hu Cho, 23, killed 32 people before turning the gun on himself, an Andrews University graduate student assaulted seminary professor Russell Burrill. Two cases of violence in a university setting,

precisely the place one would expect the moral compass to be aiming squarely at the noblest human virtues, the very place where openness to new ideas and tolerance of a diversity of opinions are nurtured. And one would have even higher expectations at a Christian university. However, the acquisition of knowledge, even religious knowledge, if not accompanied by intentional moral education, can lead to the kind of “solution” resorted to by these two students.

The questions facing Christian educators are: How can we provide knowledge and model moral virtues? Does our curriculum reflect a genuine concern for moral values?

I believe that teaching through precept and example the principles of peacemaking/peacekeeping through forgiveness is one effective way of helping our students face, with Christian wisdom and grace, the inevitable conflicts of life, thereby

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preserving their inner peace, their relationships, and their morality.

### The Fruit of the Spirit and Biblical Morality

Although the Old Testament is rich with stories and principles of morality and justice, it is the New Testament where Christians find the sources of moral practice. Galatians 5 lays out the specifics of immorality as opposed to the “fruits” of the Spirit. In Greek, *karpós* (“fruit”) suggests the results of a power that comes from within.

If the power within is evil, evil fruit will be produced (cf. Romans 6:20-21), but if the spiritual motivation is good, then love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control will issue forth (Galatians 5:22).

The first fruit—love—is the subject of a whole chapter in 1 Corinthians. Love is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered, unwilling to keep a score of wrongs. It does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth. “It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). And 1 John 3 and 4 not only exhort Christians to love, but actually make love the

test of true Christianity.

Nothing new here . . . we all know we should love. But what happens when love is extinguished by an injustice or even a minor offense? We teach our students that love is the standard, but are we teaching them by precept and example what to do when they are abused or insulted? What should a child do when a bully insults his brother because of his skin color or when a trusted



friend betrays her? The silence in our curriculum and in our own example may speak volumes about how little we really believe in forgiveness, the one Christian virtue that holds any hope of bridging our separations and restoring the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the lives of our students.

### How We Forgot Forgiveness

Of all the Christian virtues, forgiveness seems to be the least understood. Many Christians believe that forgiveness means giving up their dignity and allowing themselves to be abused. Others believe

prised to find that the Bible has so much to say about forgiveness.

Why have we lost sight of this virtue? I believe that Mark Galli's observation to his evangelical brothers and sisters applies to Adventists and answers this question, at least in part: "Evangelicals should think more about ethics, because it is fundamental to Scripture and relatively neglected among us compared to, for example, our interest in church growth, evangelism, missions, and doctrine."<sup>3</sup> He condemns the "moral sloppiness" that characterizes the church and does little to distinguish it from the

lism—to the neglect of the moral virtues that contribute to peace.

### Forgiveness in the Context of Conflict and Violence

Besides being a fundamental Christian virtue, forgiveness is a moral and ethical skill than can be taught and learned—how and when to turn the other cheek, how to confront offenders constructively, how to break the stranglehold of destructive anger, how to "bear with one another" and patiently work through our differences, how to release oneself from a painful past.

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it requires them to relinquish their right to justice. Forgiveness is for fools, say still others. And yet, Scripture is filled with invitations and even commands to forgive, including examples of the way forgiveness can reverse seemingly hopeless estrangements (Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, etc.). In visits around the world with my seminar, "I Forgive You, But..." I find that Christian believers, including Adventists, are sur-

world in attitudes and behaviors. For Galli, the greatest challenge facing the church today is to "develop a much more rigorous and thoughtful morality to go with our rigorous and thoughtful doctrinal and exegetical work."<sup>4</sup>

Like our evangelical counterparts, Adventists have tended to focus our own and our children's attention on our unique doctrines—end-time prophecies, the Sabbath, health reform, and evange-

Furthermore, it is important to understand that forgiveness is not limited to what God through Christ made available to us on the Cross—it is a moral obligation we owe ourselves and others as an act of gratitude for God's generous forgiveness. Without a comprehensive understanding of forgiveness, it will be impossible to enjoy the rewards of peace.

It's important to note that the need for forgiveness arises from acts of immorality, and, therefore, must be considered in the context of conflict and violence. In schools, including Christian institutions, bullying, racism, sexism, and social cliques all sow the seeds of conflict. Parker J. Palmer takes the definition of violence beyond bombings or shootings or physical abuse. For him, "**any way we have of violating the integrity of the other**" is violence. Racism, sexism, stereotyping, derogatory labeling, rendering other people invisible or irrelevant, manipulating and using people to serve our own ends—all of these are forms of violence.<sup>5</sup> Professors who demean their students and academic leaders who refuse to allow input on policy making are, in this sense, just as guilty of perpetrating acts of "violence" as is the schoolyard bully.

Violence in any of its manifestations reveals a moral deficiency on the part of the perpetrator. This may lead to

hurtful actions toward the perpetrator or those deemed to be responsible for that moral deficiency, setting in motion a cycle of escalating violence. Habits of self-justification and denial, unmitigated anger, even “justifiable” rage lead to what Rabbi Charles Klein has identified as “the hardened heart.”<sup>6</sup> That is, the perpetrator becomes incapable of or unwilling to acknowledge that violating another person’s dignity is morally wrong and produces serious consequences. Or the person wronged waits for the perpetrator to repent, refusing to take the first step toward reconciliation. If teachers and students are to understand their culpability for participating in these forms of violence, they must be taught to recognize the “the hardened heart,” not only in others, but also in themselves.

Palmer’s point is well-taken: Academia tends to objectify knowledge and separate it from its ethical moorings. The focus on facts and ideas demanded by the intellectual pursuit works against two of academia’s most pivotal goals: authentic inquiry and genuine discourse.<sup>7</sup> And thus a Christian professor can come to class with a “hidden curriculum,” as Palmer puts it, which he “violently” imposes on his students, ignoring their right to dialog or disagree. Likewise, a student may enter a class with an agenda that she “violently” imposes on the instructor and fellow classmates.

Parents expect the church and Christian schools to teach moral virtues; schools look to parents to have inculcated them in their children before they arrive in the classroom. Because of these mutual expectations, as well as parents’ and teachers’ failure to help students apply moral principles to their lives, our children grow up to be adults who do not know how to make moral decisions that contribute to peace. Grudges are held for years, resentments are allowed to fester under a painted smile, and the victims of violence become violators themselves.

It is important for Adventist schools at every level to ensure that students not only acquire knowledge, but also gain the sensitivity to communicate that knowledge—be it scientific or literary, or biblical—in ways that preserve other people’s dignity and integrity.

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### Why Include Forgiveness in the Curriculum?

What exactly is forgiveness, and why is it such an important element of peacemaking and peacekeeping? Why should the study of forgiveness be a part of the Adventist curriculum at all levels? And, finally, what would a college-level forgiveness course look like?

The International Forgiveness Institute, based at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, gives the following definition of forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness responds to a crass injustice by turning the other cheek,
2. Forgiveness is an unmerited act of good will that does not let the injured party harbor resentments or take vengeance,
3. The relationship is healed to the extent that the same generousities characteristic of a true friendship are shared,
4. There is an intention to do good to the other,
5. Paradoxically, on conceding forgiveness to the other, the injured party is healed,
6. Far from being a mere obligation, it is a gift that the injured party chooses to

give, freely, to the offender,

7. The former can overwhelm the latter with kindness (See <http://www.forgiveness-institute.org>).<sup>8</sup>

Forgiveness is not the same as excusing or denying an offense or diminishing its importance. Forgiveness calls for the courage to constructively confront, seek justice through legal means, and show mercy, even to those who don’t deserve it. True forgiveness is always a gift. No one can earn it—that’s why it’s called “forgiveness.” Nevertheless, it does not obviate one’s right to obtain justice.

Seeking justice through the available legal channels is a legitimate pathway to peace. But it cannot heal the inner wounds caused by an offense—only forgiveness can do that. Nor is forgiveness the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness is a decision made by the wounded party to release the offender from any “debt” owed to him or her, whether or not the victim has received justice through an apology or through the courts. Reconciliation, i.e., rebuilding the relationship, can happen only when the offending party has agreed to re-enter into the relationship under “new rules” agreed upon



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### **Forgiveness 101**

In an honors seminar entitled "Forgiveness and Culture," I have helped university students understand the importance of cultivating forgiveness as a moral virtue, even if, at this point in their spiritual journey, they are struggling with their relationship to the church and its teachings. In fact, some of these students have rediscovered the relevance of their faith through embracing forgiveness as a moral imperative. They suddenly realized that even though people had betrayed their trust or lived lives inconsistent with their preaching, they (my students) were no better than the offenders if they were unwilling to forgive. *Losing one's saltiness has less to do with church*

*affiliation than with moral fiber.*

My course on forgiveness consists of the following elements:

**1. An extensive Bible study on forgiveness** (What does the Bible say about forgiveness? Why should people forgive one another?) Here I draw from my book, *I Forgive You, But . . .*, which includes discussion questions at the end of every chapter. This study includes the Twelve Biblical Principles of Forgiveness, using citations from both the Old and New Testaments. This portion of the class ends with a "how-to" section on forgiveness: (a) if I'm the offender, (b) if I'm the victim, (c) if my offender cannot be confronted (due to death or mental illness, for example). I also discuss forgiving the unrepentant, using biblical passages in which God deals with His

unrepentant people by placing distance between them and requiring them to abide by the new rules of the relationship.

**2. Assignments that put students in contact with those who have forgiven great sins.** (Can the Holocaust be forgiven? How? By whom? Why?) Students are sent to the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles after having read from Wiesenthal's book, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. They are asked to report on their visit, which generally includes museum-sponsored interviews with Holocaust survivors or their children. Students must also respond to the above questions in writing. This assignment allows them to put their own forgiveness issue(s) in perspective.

## Of course, I've forgiven him, but . . .

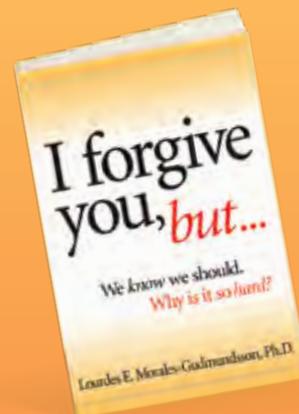
You find yourself mentioning the offense to a friend, remembering how the incident made you feel and how it affected your life. Afterward, you felt guilty. Why? Because you're a Christian. Christians are to forgive and forget, right?

Lourdes E. Morales-Gudmundsson, Ph.D., has presented seminars on forgiveness for more than twenty-five years. She has written a book for Christians who believe that forgiveness is important to their spiritual journey, but who may not understand what forgiveness really is. This is also a great book for those who just can't seem to move on from a deep hurt.

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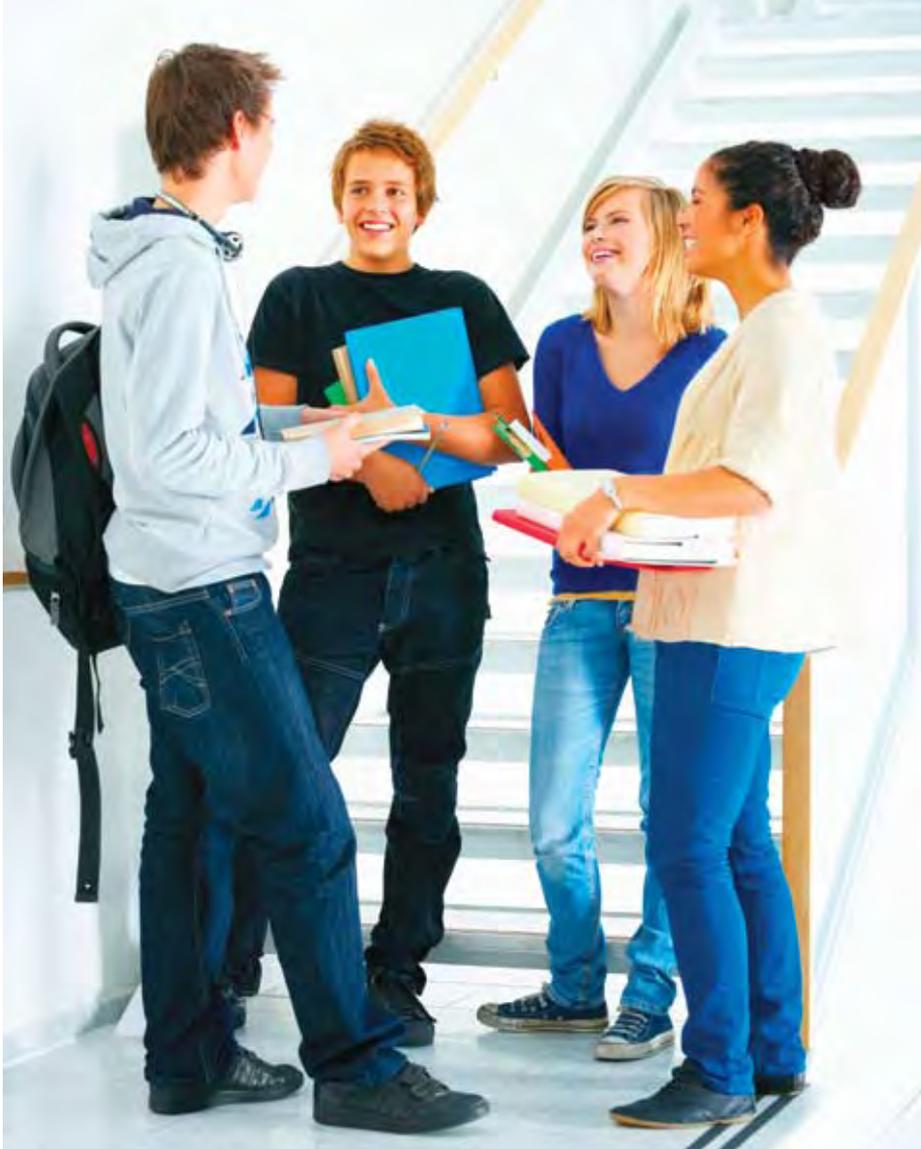


ISBN 10: 0-8163-2201-5  
ISBN 13: 978-0-8163-2201-5  
US\$13.99



Pacific Press®

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Prices subject to change.  
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**3. Guest speakers who have personally forgiven a profound injustice or participated in some movement or program to apply amnesty to a collective sin or promote peace between warring factions.** For one seminar, I invited a young woman, Fridah Nyirimana, a survivor of the 1994 Rwandan massacres, who forgave those who came very near to killing her and her immediate family to speak to the class. I was also fortunate enough to have John Webster, dean of the School of Religion at La Sierra University, tell about his involvement in articulating the Adventist Church's position on apartheid in South Africa for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (set up to address crimes against humanity perpetrated in that country). Gerald Whitehouse, director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Relations at Loma Linda University, was also an important resource as we tried to understand the

issues that separate and unite these two world religions.

**4. In-class discussion of assigned readings.** Students are asked to write down questions that arise from reading assigned books or articles, then comment in class. These readings are both theoretical (definitions of forgiveness; forgiveness studies relating to attitudes and health implications) and anecdotal (stories of people who forgave or who could/would not forgive);

**5. A journal,** which includes the student's notes on what was learned about forgiveness in the class and how he or she plans to apply these principles to a personal forgiveness issue. I read these journals and make suggestions, if necessary, then return them to each student before the end of the quarter.

**6. A final paper.** In this paper, students summarize what they have learned about forgiveness in the class and project

ways that they think these principles will affect their lives. The grade is based on (a) inclusion of lecture notes, reading notes, field trip notes, class discussion notes, (b) evidence of having applied one or more of the forgiveness principles to at least one issue in their personal life.

The key to success in teaching courses of this nature rests on: (1) *carefully selected readings*, which help facilitate discussion; (2) *non-judgmental responses to student observations* (nothing will halt discussion faster than an instructor who believes he or she has all the answers!); and (3) *confidentiality of journals and final papers*. Students will write honestly if they believe that no one other than the professor will read their work. Special care in ensuring the students' privacy will model the kind of ethical behavior the instructor is trying to teach.

These considerations about forgiveness may help answer the question posed at the beginning of this article: If the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be regained? Through a curriculum that takes moral education as seriously as it does science, the humanities, and career preparation. ✍



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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotes are taken from the New International Version.
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5. Parker J. Palmer, "The Violence of Our Knowledge: On Higher Education and Peace Making," *APS News* 16:7 (July 2007), p. 8.
6. Charles Klein, *How to Forgive When You Can't Forget* (New York: Berkley Books, 1995), pp. 12-18.
7. Palmer, *op cit.*, p. 8.
8. Quoted in Lourdes Morales-Gudmundsson, *I Forgive You, But . . .* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2007), p. 39.