

# Forgiveness is not absolution



He was in the building trade for more than twenty years and always did quite well, writes DR SALIM PARKER.

'YOU need anything, Doc?' The questioner enquired about my comfort, whether I needed any food or drink, whether I wanted any luxuries, such as decadent chocolates, and even indicated that he'd sponsor any medication that I may require.

We were in Makkah, about two weeks before Hajj. He was travelling on his own and we soon

struck up a relatively good friendship. I noticed that his generosity extended beyond the small circle of friends he had acquired on this holy journey.

Often, he would be seen pushing a wheelchair-bound hajji, carrying large cans filled with Zam-zam or helping an elderly person who was having difficulty with a mobile phone simcard

recharge.

He was not depressed, just anxious, and would look for ways to be helpful instead of sitting idly in the company of those who were raucously exchanging crude jokes and remarks about other nationalities.

He always wanted to be doing good. As a doctor, I soon realised that he wanted to stay busy so that he could forget the time that he had been bad.

Late one evening, I decided to perform a tawaaf on the roof of the Haram. He saw me leaving the hotel and asked to join me when he heard what my plans were. An hour later, after a most spiritually uplifting circumambulation of the Kaabah, and being one with more than 180 different nations, we sat down and thanked our Creator for blessing us with this honour.

The magnificence of the Kaabah in full view metres ahead of us added to the surreal feeling. He again appeared restless but I did not comment on it.

'Does a person ever truly get forgiven?' he asked out of the blue.

'If Allah indicates that we will be forgiven if we truly repent then surely we would be sinning if we doubt the words of our Creator,' I replied.

'And if a fellow human being that you harmed says they forgive you but you did not undo your offence, does that count?' he asked.

'I am not well versed in such life intricacies,' I replied.

He then related his story.

He was in the building trade for more than twenty years and always did quite well. He had a habit of buying properties that were on auction and this resulted in most of his money being tied up in his assets. He never really had cash money. He followed the modus operandi of small contractors in that he would request a substantial deposit when accepting a new project. He would then use this deposit money to complete a

previous job that he had started but did not have funds to complete as he had diverted that money into one of his properties.

'We all did it Doc; we rolled over one project and gave thousands of excuses for the delays until the deposit of the next job could cover it. It was sort of accepted in our trade. I never conned or intended to con anyone out of their money. I would, as a matter of course, finish a project without any additional charges. The completion was just delayed,' he tried to justify.

Sometimes, clients could not wait for him to complete the job and then would get someone else to do so. There would inevitably be some hassling about any refund that he had to give but he indicated that he did his best to pay back what he considered a reasonable amount. The only issue was that, as with his building contracts, he did not abide by any time intervals. An agreement that was supposed to be settled in two months could be stretched to two years. With all the wheelings and dealings he was involved in, he would lose track of what he still owed. As soon as he received a lawyer's letter demanding payment, he would scurry around looking for cash and settle that account, with another client then being destined to wait.

'I never intended not to pay, Doc,' he said. 'All I tried to do was try and divert money from one account to another and delay for as long as I could. In retrospect, I should have sold some of my properties but that thought never crossed my mind. Somehow, there were some people that I never paid back.'

When he decided to perform Hajj, he settled all his debts or so he thought. The decades of the deals he had been striking, with poor record keeping, had led to some debts never being paid.

As is customary in Cape Town, he went to greet as many people as

he could. As is also customary, he asked each and every one to forgive him for any wrongs he may have knowingly or unknowingly committed.

One of those he went to greet was a widow with young children. 'Of course we forgive anything you may have done to us,' she said. 'You are going to perform Hajj! Please keep us in your duaahs,' she requested.

One of the widow's brothers was present when he greeted. As he took his leave, her brother took him aside. 'You should settle your debt towards her and her now deceased husband,' the brother said. He was dumbstruck.

The brother reminded him about the extension he had been paid to build when she had got married. He had partially completed it and had promised to do the rest but did not. As the wedding date was set, her now deceased husband had scrambled around for money to finish the building before the big day arrived. As usual, he had pledged to pay back the money he owed and did pay some of it but only a small part.

With time – and it was by now more than ten years – the couple had just given up trying to recoup the money. Amongst all his other dealings, this debt had slipped further and further down his list of obligations until it had exited his conscious and conscience. He vaguely recalled the transaction but had no clue how much he owed. He went back inside. It was only then that he noticed the very basic décor inside the house. It transpired that she had not been working but, after the death of her husband, had been forced to take a cashier's job to keep food on the table. She had had to sell a number of their assets to settle debts. He again asked her for forgiveness.

She smiled. 'My words had no conditions attached; your debt to my husband was written off by him. I would never forgive myself if your Hajj was not accepted because of enmity from my side. Please keep us in your duaahs,' she pleaded.

'I paid some money to her but I do not really know how much I owe her,' he related as we looked at the Kaabah.

'You should consider what the value of that money would be today,' I said. 'You cannot take the face value of the amount you owe but rather what they paid you for. So, if they paid you to build a bathroom ten years ago, you owe them a bathroom at today's value.'

'Money devalues, your word and honour should not. You have enough money to do that at least. She has forgiven you but I don't think you have forgiven yourself. You still have an obligation to pay back,' I advised. He nodded.

She had forgiven him without any expectations. We all know that Allah forgives on Arafah if we truly repent. But if we have the chance to right the past wrongs before we proclaim 'Labaik' then we will truly be able to forgive ourselves.

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We cannot doubt that we will be forgiven if we truly repent and beg Allah's forgiveness on Arafah but we still need to repay what we owe others.

Photo SALIM PARKER

