

The Bitterness Trap – Forgiven to Forgive and be Free

2/3/19 – Pastor Randy

The Bitterness Trap

What is Bitterness? – Persistent feelings of resentment or animosity that result from:

- Mistreatment
- The Perception of Mistreatment
- Misfortune
- Jealousy and Envy

Definition of bitterness:

“Fellow *Psychology Today* blogger, [Stephen Diamond, Ph.D.](#), defines bitterness as “a chronic and pervasive state of smoldering resentment,” and deservedly regards it as “one of the most destructive and toxic of human emotions.” I’d add that if we repeatedly ruminate over how we’ve been victimized, our “nursing” our wrongs may eventually come to define some essential part of *who we are*; taking hold of our very [personality](#). And so we’ll end up becoming victims not so much of anyone else but, principally, of ourselves.”

– “Don’t Let Your Anger “Mature” Into Bitterness” by Leon Seltzer

Why is it a “TRAP” – A Disguised Device of the Devil

Designed to Distract, Discourage, or Destroy You by:

- Poisoning Your Spirit
- Paralyzing You Mentally & Physically
- Provoking You to Vengeful Acts

Bitterness, just like all sinful dispositions and actions, is a trap of Satan. On three different occasions in Paul’s letters to Timothy he describes those who have or are in danger of being enticed into sin as being in the Devil’s snare or trap. The use of the word trap conveys two ideas: The notion of trickery and deceit. Sin seduces us, it entices us. It is something we need to be vigilant about; on our guard against because of the subtle, deceptive nature it. It requires that the Christian be a man or woman of vigilance, wisdom, and discernment. Traps, in order to be effective, need to be hidden.

The word trap also conveys the notion that its victim is under its control. To be trapped is to be under the control of another. Bitterness is a trap:

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Bitterness creeps in unannounced and wraps its tentacles around you, holding you in its grip. In the quote I read by Leon Seltzer he spoke about the power of bitterness to “take hold of our personality” and to become a part of our identity. In other words, if we don’t escape the bitterness trap we will soon become, not just people who feel bitterness towards someone, but people who can accurately be described as “bitter people”.

When the Devil is able to entice us into developing a bitter Spirit He can distract us from doing what God called us to do. Bitterness can consume our thoughts and paralyze our actions. Bitterness can also discourage and depress us. Leon Seltzer, in the article I quoted from earlier, lists several “costs” (i.e. harmful consequences) of bitterness and one is long term anxiety and depression. Bitterness can ultimately destroy us. Two other “costs” of bitterness according to Seltzer are its ability to provoke us to evil acts of revenge -which can hurt us as much if not more than the person we take revenge on – and physical illness. Bitterness can make you physically sick!

The “Bitterness Trap” is a trap we need to learn how to avoid and escape. The best case scenario is when we avoid getting caught in the trap by detecting it ahead of time. But at some time or another you might find yourself caught in the trap and needing to escape.

Today we are going to focus our attention on how we can avoid and escape the trap when our bitterness results from the experience of mistreatment.

2 Corinthians 2:10-11 Paul wrote, *“When you forgive this man, I forgive him, too. And when I forgive whatever needs to be forgiven, I do so with Christ’s authority for your benefit, so that Satan will not outsmart us. For we are familiar with his evil schemes.”*

When your bitterness is due to mistreatment, real or perceived, and you hold onto it rather than forgive, it becomes the poison you drink while you wait for your enemy to die. The only way to escape the trap is to forgive!

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Matt. 18:21-35

Then Peter came to him and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”

“No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!

“Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him.²⁴ In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. “But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

“But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

“His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. “When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

“That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”

Secular psychologists and Christians agree that practicing forgiveness is vitally important. What we disagree about is the solution to the problem of our struggle to forgive and become free from bitterness. The motivation provided by Seltzer in his Psychology Today article is the realization that you are only hurting yourself by failing to forgive. The answer is, “Do it for yourself”. Jesus wouldn’t disagree with the notion that forgiving benefits you practically. But that motivation is not sufficient. Jesus, in Matt. 18 reveals the source that provides both the motivation and the power to forgive.

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The parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18 shows how an acute awareness of the extent of God's mercy expressed to us positions us to be able to forgive ALL the wrong done to us. In this story there is a King who had a servant that owed him a debt that the servant could never repay. He pleaded with the king to have mercy and give him a chance to repay. The king showed him even more mercy than he sought by completely forgiving the servant of the debt. As soon as this servant left the king's presence he sought out one of his peers who owed him a debt, which while not insignificant, was nothing compared to the debt he was just released from. Instead of showing any mercy to his friend, he had him thrown in prison until the debt was repaid. How do you think the king reacted when he found out how the man he forgave treated his fellow servant? You bet he was angry! If you want an example of truly righteous indignation, this is it! How dare his servant act so mercilessly after being granted such extravagant mercy! So what did the king do? He withdrew his offer of forgiveness from the servant and had him punished harshly.

What prompted Jesus to tell this story? Matthew tells us that Peter came to Jesus asking how many times he must forgive his brother. The question behind Peter's question was, "When have I fulfilled my obligation to show mercy, so I can do what I really want to do, which is to seek vengeance.

Jesus response to Peter indicates that there is to be no limit to Peter's willingness to show mercy and forgive. I believe Jesus proceeded to tell the story of the unmerciful servant because he anticipated a question that was brewing in Peter's mind; the "why" question. The question that all of us ask when instructed to do something we don't want to do. "Why do I have to forgive?" The "why" question addresses the motivation behind the action and Jesus gave great emphasis in his teaching to the importance of righteous action being righteously motivated. So Jesus was happy to explain to Peter the motivation of the merciful; an acute awareness of, and appreciation for the mercy God has extended to them. The king in Jesus' story was enraged, not just because the servant was unmerciful. He was indignant because the servant's lack of mercy showed a total lack of awareness of, and appreciation for, the mercy the king showed him. If the servant really appreciated what

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was done for him he would have gladly forgiven his fellow servant. Especially since the debt he had been forgiven was so much greater than the debt he was asked to forgive. Here is a point we cannot afford to miss.

The servant, whom the king desired to grant mercy to, in the end did not receive mercy. Not because the king's character changed from merciful to unmerciful, but because the servant showed utter contempt for the mercy offered to him. The King's punishment at the end doesn't contradict his nature as a merciful King. He didn't take back his mercy, because his mercy was never truly received.

Let me put it another way: The servant did not EXPERIENCE mercy from the king ultimately because he did not TRULY RECEIVE the mercy the king offered him initially! His actions made a mockery of the king's mercy. His unwillingness to forgive was in essence a rejection of the forgiveness offered him.

Those who are genuine recipients of God's are changed by God's mercy, both objectively and subjectively. There is an outward change of status (from guilty to justified) and an inward change of heart (gratitude, love, joy). The problem with the unmerciful servant is that his external status was changed, but his heart was left unchanged.

He didn't reject the mercy of the King, but neither did he respect the mercy of the King. He didn't reject the offer to be released of his debt, but he did reject the merciful character of the King by not allowing it to influence his behavior; actions that were tantamount to a rejection of the King.

What Jesus was communicating to Peter, and to us, is that if we are genuinely aware of, and appreciative for, the incomparable mercy shown to us through Jesus' sacrificial death, we will be motivated AND empowered to forgive those who have sinned against us.

To forgive is give up your right to hurt someone else for hurting you. Forgiveness is *a choice* we are *motivated to make* because *God has forgiven us*.

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Bitterness is a feeling we are *empowered to overcome* because our *hearts are full of the merciful love of God*.

Experiencing freedom from the emotional pain of injustice, abuse, neglect, abandonment, etc...is not *in our power* but *through the power of the Holy Spirit*.

When we are hurt we become carriers of hurt. Hurt is what we have to give. Hurting people hurt others. When we receive mercy and love we become carriers of mercy and love. The forgiven forgive!! Bitterness only sees what's been done TO me. Healing comes from seeing what's been done FOR me!!

You can't give what you don't have, but if you have it you can give it!