

The Bitterness Trap – Trust and Be Free

2/10/19 – 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

Why is it a “TRAP” and What Kind of “Trap” is it? – 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

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; needing the tools to escape.

Last Sunday we learned that the motivation to forgive and the power to be free from bitterness comes from:

- **An awareness of, and appreciation for, God’s mercy extended to us.**

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!!

Today we are going to learn about a second source of freedom from the bitterness trap.

- **A confident trust in God as the one who determines Your destiny**

We see this second principle clearly depicted in the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob who is also called Israel.

The story of Joseph begins in Genesis 37 when Joseph was 17 years old. He was the 11th of Jacob’s 12 sons; the oldest son of Rachel, Jacob’s favored wife.

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Here are the key facts we learn as the story begins:

1. Joseph brought a “bad report” to his father about his brothers.
2. Joseph’s father loved him more and showed favoritism to him.
3. Joseph told his brothers about two dreams he had which depicted them bowing down to him. Either Joseph was arrogant or lacked people skills.
4. Joseph’s behavior and the behavior of his father Jacob provoked Joseph’s brothers to jealousy and hatred. Their jealousy led to bitterness.

The action picks up with Joseph being asked by his father, once again, to check on his brother’s who had been out tending their father’s flocks. When they saw Joseph coming they began to share their bitterness; provoking each other to consider killing him. Reuben, the oldest, persuaded them against taking such harsh action and suggested they just throw him in a dried out cistern. Reuben’s intent was to come by later and rescue Joseph. They took Reuben’s advice, ripped Joseph’s robe off of him and threw him in the pit. As they were debating what to do next, a caravan of Midianite traders came by and Judah, the 4th oldest, came up with a brilliant idea: “He is our brother, we can’t kill him...let’s just sell him as a slave.”

So Joseph was sold by his brother’s to the Midianite slave traders who then sold Joseph to a man named Potiphar, the chief military officer in Egypt. The next part of the story is critical to this message. The text tells us that the Lord was with Joseph and he became successful. Potiphar recognized the Lord was with Joseph and responsible for Joseph’s success. Joseph found such favor and trust with Potiphar that he was placed as the overseer of his large household and all his other servants.

Potiphar had so much trust in Joseph that he never even felt the need to check up on him. With this trust came a test. Potiphar’s wife found Joseph attractive and made advances towards him. Joseph resisted but she persisted, until one day she grabbed his outer garment and put him in a position where his only option was to literally flee from her presence. When he ran out to escape her grasp she ended up with his garment in her hand. In this instance the old saying, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” came true. She was

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furiously and decided to punish Joseph. She falsely accused him of trying to rape her and Joseph, a slave with no rights of due process, was thrown into prison. But what we read next is again critical to today's message:

“But the Lord was with Joseph...and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.” “And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners.” “And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.”

When Joseph was in the prison he wasn't only faithful to the responsibilities given to him by the warden, he showed an interest in the hurts of others. In Ch. 40 we read that Pharaoh was angry at his chief cup-bearer and chief baker so he put them in the prison and the captain of the guard had Joseph supervise them. While they were in prison, they each had a dream that worried them.

Joseph both NOTICED they were upset and SHOWED CONCERN for them.

Joseph interpreted the meaning of the dreams of chief cup-bearer and chief baker. The cup-bearer was to be restored to his position serving the King. The baker was going to be skewered - literally. Joseph asked the cup-bearer one simple favor; to put in a good word for him to the King (Pharaoh). The cup bearer forgot all about Joseph after he was released. Joseph had been disrespected again!!

Then, 2 years later, Pharaoh had a dream that no one could interpret and the cup-bearer remembered how Joseph had correctly interpreted his dream. Pharaoh called for Joseph. Joseph interpreted his dreams revealing that Egypt would experience seven years of abundant harvest followed by seven years of famine. Joseph proceeded to explain to Pharaoh what needed to be done to prepare for the famine and Pharaoh, recognizing the hand of God on Joseph's life, made him the second most powerful man in all of Egypt.

Joseph was thrown into a cistern and degraded to the status of a slave by his brothers...but God lifted him up. Potiphar's wife had him thrown down into prison but God lifted him up.

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Joseph was betrayed and turned into a slave, unjustly accused and treated as a criminal. But all of this mistreatment was being used by God to propel him forward towards his destiny

Fast forward seven years. The famine has begun, but because of Joseph's leadership Egypt's storehouses are full of food. Meanwhile, back in Canaan Joseph's family is suffering from the famine. His father sent his sons to Egypt to buy food. When they got to Egypt they were brought before Joseph. They had no idea that they were standing before their brother whom they sold into slavery about 20 years earlier. There are three chapters detailing the interaction between Joseph and his brothers which may appear as if Joseph was tormenting them, but he was testing them, to find out the condition of their hearts. Once he saw evidence that his brother's were truly sorry for what they had done - expressed specifically through the words of his brother Judah -he finally revealed himself to them. He then displayed one of the most beautiful examples of genuine forgiveness you will ever find. The key statements are found in Genesis 45 & 50. Without ever saying the words, "I forgive you", Joseph's words and actions demonstrated deep, profound forgiveness.

Look at 45:2-3

"I am Joseph!" he said to his brothers. "Is my father still alive?" But his brothers were speechless! They were stunned to realize that Joseph was standing there in front of them. "Please, come closer," he said to them. So they came closer.

Genuine forgiveness is evidenced by a desire to close the relational gap.

45:5 – *"But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place." True forgiveness seeks to alleviate the person's guilt.*

45:11 *-I will take care of you there, for there are still five years of famine ahead of us. Otherwise you, your household, and all your animals will starve."*

45:15 – *"Then Joseph kissed each of his brothers and wept over them, and after that they began talking freely with him."*

The words "I forgive you" do not come close to communicating forgiveness as profoundly as Joseph's actions did.

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So what was Joseph's secret? How did he avoid the bitterness trap? How was he able to extend forgiveness to those who had hurt him? It wasn't because he was immune to feeling hurt and angry. The names he gave his sons communicated that the injustices done to him caused him real pain. His first son he named Manasseh, meaning "*God has made me forget*" my hardship and my brother's house. God enabled him to leave his hurts behind. The second he named Ephraim meaning, "*God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.*"

The answer is found in Joseph's words in Genesis 45:5-8:

But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me... It was God who sent me... to preserve your lives... God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here, not you!

After Jacob, Joseph's father died, his brothers began to wonder if Joseph would now exact revenge. They wondered if he was only being kind to them as an act of kindness to their father. When Joseph became aware of this fear of theirs he reiterated that his forgiveness was solid. Genesis 50:20 records the most oft quoted words of Joseph to his brothers:

"As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good."

Joseph again demonstrated the sincerity of his forgiveness by calming his brother's fears and assuring them that he would take care of them.

Here is the secret of Joseph's success. A confident, never wavering trust in God's love for us and sovereignty over our lives. If you are going to avoid the bitterness trap when people wrong you and hurt you, you are going to have to believe this:

GOD, NOT MAN, DETERMINES YOUR DESTINY!

When Joseph experienced the mistreatment, God was doing a work in him so he could one day do a great work through him.

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What about you? Do you believe that God's power to help you is greater than the power of others to hurt you? Will you trust God when you are betrayed; cheated; ripped off; lied to; slandered; abused?

Do you still believe, "If God be for me, who can be against me?" Or in those moments do you start believing, "If others are against me, God must not be me?" or "Those who are against me are greater than God Who is for me."

Clarification: Do not misinterpret what I am saying to suggest that a Christians should never defend themselves against injustice. God's word does not tell us that we have to passively accept or even invite abuse! No, no, no. But there are situations where we don't have the ability to secure justice for ourselves. Even when a person who has harmed us has been held accountable for their actions, that doesn't negate the real pain you may have suffered or are suffering as a result. Not all wrongs can be righted...at least not until Christ returns. There is a vast difference between justice being served, wrongs being righted, and seeking revenge or payback.

The question for the Christian is always, "What does love require of me?" "What response expresses love?" Loving someone does not mean we let them off the hook when they do wrong. That response only paves the way for them to continue the wrong behavior, thus distancing themselves from God, diminishing and degrading themselves as persons created in the image of God, damaging the people they will continue to sin against, and ultimately destroying themselves.

You might object and say, "But Joseph was in a position of power and prosperity. It was easy for him to forgive brothers because he wasn't suffering anymore. It was easy for him to be released from his bitterness because he wasn't hurting anymore.

Response: Just because his dreams were fulfilled doesn't mean he had to accept that the evil done to him was a necessary part of the fulfillment. Just because we are in a good place now doesn't make it easy to forgive severe mistreatment from the past. Imagine telling a black person who lived in the south under Jim Crow laws that what he experienced doesn't matter now

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because it is a “past” experience. Forgiveness is made easier when the suffering is over but that doesn’t mean it is easy! We need God’s power!!

There is good reason to believe that Joseph, to at least a significant degree, avoided the trap of bitterness even while he was suffering injustice.

You can be hurt without becoming bitter. When I suggest that Joseph avoided the bitterness trap I am not suggesting that he was not angry about the injustice he experienced. I am not suggesting that he wasn’t bothered by what had been done to him. He felt anger, he felt the pain of betrayal. What he didn’t do was let his injustice provoke him to evil. He didn’t let it poison his spirit. He didn’t let it paralyze him from doing what God wanted him to do!

I told you earlier that the words we read immediately after Joseph was sold to Potiphar and thrown into prison are critical to this message. The Lord was with Joseph enabling him to perform his work so effectively and responsibly that he gained an incredible high degree of trust. Joseph flourished due to a combination of exemplary character and skill. His story gives profound meaning to the phrase “bloom where you are planted”. We think being in the position of a ‘slave’ or ‘servant’ precludes, rules out, success and flourishing. We assume that being a prisoner precludes, makes it impossible, for someone to flourish and be successful. That depends on your definition of success. We think that “slave”, “servant” and “prisoner” are various ways of spelling “defeat”. Physical walls, physical chains, and man-made labels can’t limit God.

Joseph did not exhibit any of the usual attitudes and actions one would expect from a bitter person. Bitterness manifests itself in unhappiness, antagonism, vindictiveness, complaining and self-pity. The bitter person, so full of his own hurt, is incapable of experiencing empathy or sympathy for the needs of others. Along with the above generally comes a spirit of apathy, and entitlement. Bitter people do not have a servant’s heart, being concerned more with their rights than their responsibilities. Joseph’s behavior is the complete antithesis of the behavior one would expect from a bitter person. It would not have been surprising for him to view himself as entitled to seize any extra enjoyment that came his way. I wouldn’t expect Joseph to show

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concern for the other prisoners. I would expect him to be wallowing in self-pity! You don't succeed and get elevated to a position of responsibility and authority over others without a good attitude and hard work, qualities you don't find in bitter, resentful people.

We can avoid and escape the bitterness trap. But we need what Joseph had: A confident, never wavering trust in God's love for us and sovereignty over our lives. If you are going to avoid the bitterness trap when people wrong you and hurt you, you are going to have to believe this:

GOD, NOT MAN, DETERMINES YOUR DESTINY!

What about you? Do you believe that God's power to help you is greater than the power of others to hurt you? Will you trust God when you are betrayed; cheated; ripped off; lied to; slandered; abused?

Does the word you believe say, "Others are against me, so God must not be for me?" Does it say, "Those who are against me are greater than God Who is for me." OR....

Does it say, "If God be for me, who can be against me?"

My enemies meant evil against me; but God meant it for good."

My enemies might have sold me out, but God is sending me out.

Prayer:

God, because I am your child, empowered by your Spirit, trusting in your faithfulness I won't be poisoned by the bait of bitterness, I won't be paralyzed by the trap of bitterness, I won't be provoked by the pressure of bitterness.

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