

Jan 13

Bitterness

Ephesians 4:26-32

Today we look at another stealer of Joy. It is bitterness. For this sermon, I define bitterness as the anger we have held onto until it has gained the power to hold onto us. Unchecked it can harden your heart toward God. In fact, it can destroy your soul. Bitterness is more than the flash of anger we feel when we have been hurt deeply and unfairly. It is an old wound that has never healed, but instead, has become infected and inflamed. At times it may feel like a raging fire, burning deep inside our souls as we remember the wrong we suffered. At other times, it's the pain within our hearts which is causing us to become cold and hard. Either way, anger, allowed to linger, will turn into bitterness, and bitterness will steal our joy.

Some of you may be feeling that this topic does not apply to you. There are two possible reasons you may feel that way. The first is that you have already done the hard work of forgiving everyone who has ever hurt you. If so, I commend you! The second is that you are in denial about what happened to you and the person you need to forgive. You have buried your hurt so deeply that you are not consciously aware of it any longer. Or, you know that it is there, but looking at it honestly is so threatening to you, that you have decided to ignore it.

In the real world we hurt others and others hurt us. When the pain we experience is deep and unfair, there is no real cure other than forgiveness. When I talk to people who are honest with me, I find there is often pain in their lives. All of us carry some burden that makes life difficult. We bear the pain of something we have done. We suffer because of something that was done to us. For some it isn't what someone did, it is what someone didn't do. Some of our deepest wounds come from the times that someone we thought we could count on didn't do anything at all. Sometimes we even believe God has let us down.

If we don't deal with our wounds honestly, they remain inside of us and can rob us of joy. Even if it happened long ago, the effects are still there. Don't deal with your pain, don't forgive, let your wound turn into bitterness and it will steal your joy and spill over into other areas of your life.

If bitterness is so painful for us to bear, why would anyone hold on to it? One reason is that, like anything we feed, bitterness gets bigger and stronger over time. In Ephesians, it is described as a foothold for the devil. Bitterness will not release us from its grip simply because we finally see the damage it is doing in our lives and we wish it would leave. We have to work hard to get rid of it.

Another reason people don't let go of their bitterness is because in a way that is twisted and perverse, anger can be enjoyable. Someone wrote of the Seven Deadly Sins: "anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back, in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself."

A third reason that people do not let go of bitterness is that they are afraid. Some people don't know who they will be without their anger, because their identity is so enmeshed with being a victim. The wrong done to them has provided an excuse for their not moving forward in life. If they forgive, they will have to change how they live and who they are. They fear that the devil they do not know—a new identity and a new way of living—might be worse than the bitter devil they do know. The question Jesus asked the man beside the pool who had been there many years, "Do you wish to be made whole?" makes sense. To be whole would mean a lot of changes in his life. He was good at being a crippled beggar. Wholeness would mean something new.

The question is still asked: Do you want to be made whole? Are you willing to stop blaming others for how you feel or where you are in life? Are you willing to be set free from the delicious taste and addictive power of bitterness so you can experience a life of freedom and joy? If so, forgiveness is your way out. It is your way forward. It is the only way.

Forgiveness is a process. It doesn't happen in a moment. Forgiveness is a process by which we separate the person who hurt us from the action that hurt us. In our hearts, we remove a person's sins from who he or she is so we can relate to that person differently. In our minds, we may still remember what the person did to us, but

how we feel and act is no longer controlled by the harm we experienced. And in the process we are freed from the spiritual poison of anger and bitterness.

You might be thinking. This is crazy, in fact impossible. You may not want to forgive. You might want to say: "You don't know what you are asking me to do. You don't know what he or she did to me." You are right. But I do know what you are doing to yourself. I know that bitterness doesn't harm the person who hurt you; it only deepens your own pain. There is no reset button you can push so that all the pain immediately goes away. But you can decide to begin the process that will free you from anger, the process of forgiving.

I want to suggest that there are three steps to forgiveness. The first is that we must own our pain. What this means is that we must feel the injustice we have suffered and acknowledge the pain that our wound has caused us. Sometimes we don't allow ourselves to feel this hurt. It seems as if we are just reliving the past. But when we refuse to acknowledge how something has hurt us and the pain we still carry, we will never be able to fully forgive. When we turn off the hurtful feelings, we die a bit inside. Also, it hurts to hurt and sometimes we don't want to go through the pain to wholeness. You cannot give to God what you do not have. Once we claim the pain, we can give it away. So the process of forgiveness is to acknowledge and own the pain, but don't plan on keeping hold of it. It is the first step to releasing it.

Second, we must hold the person who harmed us responsible for their actions. Excusing says someone is not responsible for what she or he did. Forgiveness says she or he is. We possess a conscience. We can choose good over evil. We are responsible for the choices we make. When one person excuses another's bad behavior, though it may seem like a gracious act, it is just the opposite. It denies the other person his or her humanity. Words like "My mother did her best. She just couldn't be there for me because she was an alcoholic," sounds gracious and kind but they are the opposite. Understanding why someone did something may make forgiveness easier but denying that others are responsible for what they did denies their ability to change. The problem is that if we hold people responsible for what they did we are afraid we may become angry with them. Indeed, we may. And very often we should. Anger in the face of evil is

a proper response. Anger is one letter away from danger. Making sure we are angry at the right person, to the right degree and for the right reason and for no longer than we should be—that is hard. But it is part of the process.

When we excuse someone who has harmed us, all we are doing is pushing our anger so far down that we think we have gotten rid of it but it doesn't mean that it has gone away. Holding someone responsible for their actions and for the harm they did to us doesn't mean that we are going to take them to court, exact revenge or even demand an apology but neither are we going to make excuses for their actions or act as if their choices are of little consequence.

Finally, we must give our pain and anger to God and then we are set free. Forgiveness is a change in us. It doesn't necessarily change the person who caused our pain. But it brings healing and wholeness to the place where we have been wounded. The beauty of forgiveness is that it is not dependent upon the other person. Forgiveness is not about getting justice. Forgiveness lets him or her go emotionally and spiritually. In your heart and mind this person no longer owes you anything because you have canceled the debt. Forgiveness is not justice it is grace.

So: How do you forgive:

1. Focus on the forgiveness God gave you. When we think only of our wounds we cannot begin the process. When we contemplate how much we have been forgiven, it causes a bit more grace to flow from us to others.
2. Tell God about your pain. God knows how much you hurt. Let God know, but then ask God to take the pain. Don't try to get it back by holding on and reliving it. See it as a gift given to God.
3. Give up your claim on the other person. This is the hard one. Finally let go of your claims. You might feel your need for justice, for them to say they are sorry, for them to change or any other claim you might have mentally made. Release it. You have to finally come to the point where you acknowledge that they owe you nothing.
4. Ask God to change your heart. To get to that point requires a change in you, not in them. Ask God to thaw those frozen parts of your life.

5. Verbalize it - say the words out loud. Saying a person's name and saying that you forgive them might be one of the hardest things you have ever done. Saying it not because it is the right thing, but because you are not going to hold onto the pain, you have released your claims on them. You verbalize it so you hear what you are saying and own it. You have to keep saying it until it is true.
6. Extend a kindness to the person who hurt you. This might sound surprising but in doing something for them you no longer picture them as the enemy. It might be sending them a note. If they have passed, it might be donating to a charity in their name. You have spent so much time being angry with them that you might have forgotten that they are a beloved child of God. Doing something kind for them or in their name reminds you of this fact. It might, if they are alive, make a difference to them.

A word of caution. Just because you forgive someone you do not necessarily need to reestablish the same kind of relationship that you had with them previously. We need to forgive, not be foolish or naïve. We are to get rid of bitterness, not our powers of discernment. Not every act of forgiveness results in reconciliation. But every act of grace brings healing to our hearts.

Your life is too important to be destroyed by the cruelty of others or the injustice you have experienced. Bitterness does nothing but consume the vessel that contains it. There is healing for you. There is a new life waiting for you. You can decide today to begin the process of forgiveness and be set free of your pain and anger to experience the joy of Christ.