

The Bitterness Circle

Forgiveness and Finding our Way out of Hurt and Bitterness

Speak the Language: A Resource by Matt Sprenger

The Story of Saul, David, vagabonds and Michal (1 Samuel 15 - 2 Samuel 6)

King Saul sat on his throne in pain. Devoid of the presence of the Spirit of the Lord, Saul sat under attack from an evil spirit. His attendants begged him to allow them to find someone who could play music to soothe their king. They found a young shepherd, considered already a brave man and a warrior. The God-devoted fingers of David faithfully strummed his lyre before Saul, putting the evil spirit to flight and bringing relief to his king.

King Saul sat on a makeshift throne near the battlefield in turmoil. The Philistine giant from Gath, Goliath, taunted him, his men, his nation, and the Lord...and no one was found to confront him. No one...including the king. The young shepherd-musician, David, visited his brothers on the front lines, delivering much-needed rations. As he heard the taunts of the Philistine he was incensed. The rumors of his disgust made their way to the king. In short time, David, full of trust in the Lord, took his sling and a few smooth stones and ran headlong at Goliath. He released a stone which sank into the forehead of the Philistine, snatched the giant's sword and decapitated him, bringing relief to his king and the nation.

King Saul sat on his throne in anger and hurt. His young armor bearer and mightiest warrior, David, returned from serving his king on yet another mission. The cheering crowds sang loudly, "Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands". In fear at the words of the people, Saul worked to see his mightiest protector and warrior put to death at enemy hands. But David humbly served and slew the enemies. Saul's fear turned to pleasure when he learned that his daughter Michal was in love with David. Hoping she would be a snare to him he offered his daughter for the (disturbing) price of one hundred Philistine foreskins to prove David's worth, assuming the young man would die in such a battle. Instead David returned with two hundred. Saul experienced no relief.

King Saul sat on his throne in fear and made David an enemy to the end of his days. Spears were slung and pursuit was taken. David, hurt by the rejection and malice of his king, was driven to hide in caves. His wife Michal was given to another man. He had no one...but the Lord. As he sat alone in a cave, men began coming. Four hundred gathered around him, broken and hurting men, who had experienced the worst of life, men who were "in distress or in debt or discontented." These were men who were looking for a way to lash out at the world, and they found the world's greatest warrior. So they made him their commander. He could be a king.

David had no throne, but they followed him for years as he fled Saul. They followed when he would allow no ill word or action be taken against Saul. They wanted to taste revenge and inflict pain and suffering, like they had experienced, but David, their cave commander, would not allow it. When David and a few men found Saul relieving himself in a cave, they cut off a corner of his garment, but David would not kill him. When he left the cave, David was ashamed that he would even do this, so he soon followed and called out to the king, so that his men may hear and know that he wants no harm for the king...but only relief. Saul is the Lord's anointed and the Lord's purpose was enough for David. Saul seemed to believe this for a moment and left. Yet, the pursuit began again...and the scene was repeated again. David will not kill his king, and Saul walks away dejected and with no relief, outshone by David's humility, honor, and trust of the Lord.

King Saul, wounded in battle with the Philistines, fell on his own sword. Fittingly this marked the end of his story. He killed himself, but of course he had already done that. He had done that by allowing his hurt to become bitterness. His bitterness had grown into rebellion of the Lord. His rebellion evolved into deception, where he began believing lies about his most faithful servant and warrior. In this state of deception, Saul's targets for hurt were many. Jonathan was slaughtered in the same battle. His daughter, Michal, was carried away from the husband she loved...hurt and broken as well. David lamented the death of his king. He lamented the death of his best friend, Jonathan, the king's son.

Within a few years time, David the shepherd-musician-warrior became King David. Those discontented, indebted and distressed men became warriors and leaders. They became loyal and faithful and true, serving alongside him in simple skirmishes and fearsome battles...and growing to reflect the character of their king. He sent for his wife Michal, who had been given in marriage to another man, but she came back different. When King David brought back the ark of God, the reference point of the presence of God, to Jerusalem, David led the charge in worship and dancing. He danced with all his might to sounds of trumpet blasts and shouts. But Michal couldn't see the ark or the worship or the presence of the Lord. Walls were up, her heart was clouded over and all she saw was a ridiculous and inappropriate act. She despised her husband in her heart, telling him he was like a "vulgar fellow". David was unwavering in his love and trust for the Lord, declaring to Michal, "I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in high honor." Michal had no children to the day of her death following this. We don't know if that was by the hand of God, or by the simple choice of Michal to stay away from the husband who disgusted her.

Our Story

All of us have been hurt. The reality is that we've been hurt legitimately, but also at times, we have been hurt only because of our perceptions. The pain of that hurt is allowed to fester and take root as bitterness. Bitterness is simply defined as a state of showing strong and unrelenting hostility and resentment toward our hurt.

Hurt → Bitterness

But the problem with bitterness is that it doesn't stop. This is why the author of Hebrews challenges his readers, "See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Bitterness is like a weed. Once the seed of it hits the ground, it starts trying to take root and multiply, causing trouble and defiling (tainting, making impure, dirtying) many. How does this work?

Think about it...when you've been hurt, and it's been a hurt that you haven't wanted to let go, what happens between you and the person who hurt you (again, real or perceived)? An invisible wall goes up. You lose relationship. You lose depth. They may know they hurt you, or they may not know they hurt you. They may care...or not care. Whatever the case may be, the trouble causes walls to go up. And walls multiply. Once you have a wall between you and that person, what about their friends? Mutual friends? Do we take sides now? Walls begin to form with other relationships that had little to do with that hurt. And then many are defiled. You begin rebelling against that person. You envy and become jealous that they seem to be unaffected by the hurt you experience.

And the rebellion extends towards God. We begin forming a wall between God and ourselves. We know that we should forgive, or seek reconciliation, or ask for help, but we are unwilling to do that...it's just not fair that they should get away with hurting us!

Hurt → Bitterness → Rebellion

But we don't stop there. What we'd really like to see is vengeance. Surely God is just, right?!? We purposefully seek to oppose (loudly or quietly) the one who hurt us. We rejoice when they stumble or fall short. And we justify ourselves before God. We rationalize the distance. We count our actions over our faith and our rules lived by over our love (or lack thereof). And, meanwhile, that person still seems unaffected by how they hurt us! We choose to see others' mistakes, shortcomings and faults, and compare ourselves constantly. We begin to rationalize our own selfishness. We live in a growing state of deception. We believe lies about ourselves, other people, the one who hurt us, and even God. We begin to reject the authority of God in our lives and those in authority over us.

Hurt → Bitterness → Rebellion → Deception

And what do people do who are in this state? They become like the ones who hurt them...they hurt others, and are easily hurt themselves. The circle continues going around, inviting (dragging) others onboard.

Hurt → Bitterness → Rebellion → Deception → Hurt

Isn't it astonishing that David didn't get on this circle? His king Saul did. His wife Michal did. But David found a way out. And he led four hundred hurting men out of that circle. How would you like four hundred distressed, indebted and discontented strong men (many skillful with a sword and bow) standing around you when you might just be considering retaliation? It would be the greatest opportunity ever to seek revenge! Who better to justify their actions than one wrongfully hurt...repeatedly? David was faithful; Saul was unfaithful. David had integrity; Saul was duplicitous. David was humble; Saul was arrogant. David trusted God; Saul trusted himself. Even Saul's son, Jonathan, could see David was in the right. David had more reasons than most of us will ever have to hurt back. But he didn't.

Everyone gets hurt; it is a common experience of humanity. But how we respond to that hurt is what is important. At the risk of sounding cheesy, we have the opportunity to either get bitter...or get better.

Winkie Pratney gives us ten characteristics of a hurt and bitter person:

1. They show a lack of concern for others. A bitter person cares very little about anybody else.
2. They're very sensitive and touchy. For instance, if a bitter person walks into a room where two other people are talking, and those people get quieter as he walks in, the bitter person thinks, "they're talking about me."
3. They become very possessive with just a few friends, and rarely ever have any really close friends. They also have an unnatural fear of losing their friends.
4. They tend to avoid meeting new people.
5. They show little or no gratitude at all.
6. They will usually speak words of empty flattery or harsh criticism.
7. They hold grudges, often for a long, long time. They find it extremely difficult to forgive.
8. They often have a stubborn or sulking attitude.
9. They are usually unwilling to share or help anybody.
10. They end up experiencing mood extremes; very high and happy one minute, and the next thing you know, they're so low they can reach up and touch bottom.

When we read the Psalms of David, we are repeatedly exposed to David's heart. He's brutally

honest in these prayer-songs to God. But again and again you see David leaving the state of his enemies and pursuers in the hands of God. Even when his own son Absalom was in open rebellion to him and grabbed the throne, David trusted God...and demonstrated before his men that God is the ultimate King, Rescuer, Defender and Strong place. And David found relief.

The Bitterness Circle: **Hurt → Bitterness → Rebellion → Deception ... → Hurt**

- Hurt – we all experience it...real or perceived
- Bitterness – you have the choice to become bitter or better
- Rebellion– invisible walls go up
- Deception – you begin to rationalize your own selfishness

Forgiveness – the Way Out

Jesus offered a startling way for His disciples to experience the Kingdom of God coming on earth and God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven in the Lord's Prayer. We forgive others...and experience the same measure of forgiveness from God as we offer to others. God wants to offer the full measure. His kingdom comes as we offer the full measure of forgiveness to others. That is scary. Dr. Richard Dobbins writes, "protecting yourself from being deeply hurt again by hanging onto anger and hatred is like trying to cure your headache by cutting your head off." Forgiveness frees us from anger and pain. It's where David found his relief. Dr. Dobbins would often ask this question in walking someone through the process of forgiveness, "Do you want to be well bad enough to forgive them?" Willingness and readiness aren't the same thing. But willingness will follow readiness if willingness is there. Dr. Dobbins goes on, "Readiness to forgive requires us to drain all the infection out of these painful sores of the soul - not just to grow scabs on them."

Here are some basic steps that would be great to walk through with your Life Group or Resource Group Leader:

1. *Make a list of the people who've hurt you.* Beside each name write down everything they've done to hurt you. These may be family members, romantic relationships, pastors or spiritual leaders, doctors, other races or groups or religions, friends, coworkers, police, etc. This will likely also include yourself.
2. *Make another list of the things you've done to hurt them.* These may be things like laziness, ungratefulness, disrespect and dishonor, lying, stealing, cheating, deceitfulness, etc. The point here is to recognize where we are wrong. Pratney writes, "The key to forgiveness is to see how much you have done. We always tend to magnify other people's offenses and minimize our own. You ask God to show you, and you'll find an interesting thing. A lot of the ways that people have hurt you are the very same ways that you've hurt others."
3. *Take a close look at how you've hurt the Lord.* No excuses. Recognize the damage your sin has done to your relationship with Jesus. Jesus knows hurt. But he has never been bitter or resentful. Remember his words on the Cross, "Father, forgive them..." Grief is proportional to intimacy. No one knows you better. No one has experienced more the pain of your sin than Jesus.
4. *Pray, and ask the forgiveness of God and man.* Walk through your list of how you've hurt others and ask for forgiveness of each one from the Lord. Reach out to them and ask for forgiveness where you can. Then walk through the list of how you've hurt God and ask Him for forgiveness of each one. When you finish these, destroy them. Rip them up, burn them up, whatever method you like. Jesus' blood is enough and His grace is strong enough – that's why the author of Hebrews didn't want his disciples falling short of it.
5. *Walk through the list of how you've been hurt and voice forgiveness for each one.* Leave no one off that list that you forgive. Skip no name...including your own. Release it all to God. Then destroy that list. Tear it up and burn it. Flush it. Forgiveness is keeping no record of wrongs. Forgive...and release.