

FREEDOM AT LAST! **Dealing with Bitterness**

2016

For some time now, I have been struggling with an issue in my life which I was hoping would go away on its own, but it didn't... I'm talking here about bitterness; one the most invasive and destructive feelings I have ever experienced in my life... And what is so appalling is that it just sneaked up on me over past hurts caused by people that most probably didn't have a clue that their words or actions deeply hurt me. However, in as much as I want to justify my response to their offense, I realize that holding on to what they had done to me doesn't solve the problem at all. I'm only hurting myself in the process, and my reason for wanting to end this nightmare.

I recently read an article on the subject that explains very well how bitterness works. *'Bitterness starts small. An offense burrows its way into our hearts. We replay it in our minds, creating deep ruts that will be hard to build back up. We retell our hurts to any available listener. We fool ourselves into thinking no one will know, but anger and resentment have a way of seeping into everything. Resentment is like a beach ball we try to submerge in the water. No matter how valiant our efforts, it pops up with all its vitality, splashing everyone around.'*¹

I was pondering over this article today as I sat in my backyard overlooking the lake - or what's left of it - when I saw a motorized rowboat with a man aboard. I quickly grabbed the binoculars sitting on the table next to me to look more closely. Find me curious, but it's not every day we see action on this part of the lake!.. *Well, what a surprise!* I thought. Steering the boat was the preacher wearing his usual red scarf... I quickly put the binoculars back on the table and headed in his direction, waving at him to attract his attention. He saw me, and slowly made his way to the water edge where I was standing.

"What are you doing on this side of the lake?" I shouted, a bit out of breath.

"I can ask you the same question, dear lady!" he answered as he finally got off the boat and pulled it on dry land.

"I live here!.. You see the beige retaining wall over there? That's my property!" I exclaimed.

"Well, isn't this great!..I knew we were from the same neighborhood but you never told me you lived right on the lake!... First time I venture on this side with my boat and here you are!.." he said with a grin on his face."

"Do you have time to visit?.. I asked.

"Sure!"

"You'll see, we have a beautiful view from our yard." I commented.

As we entered the grounds, he exclaimed: "Oh, what a lovely property you have here!.. How did you find this jewel?"

"Well, it's a long story but let me just say that God had it reserved especially for us a long time ago...the details of which will have to wait for another day!" I answered with a twinkle in my eyes.

"I respect your wish, dear lady... but may I remind you that at my age I don't have the leisure of waiting too long for you to tell me that story?" he teased.

I purposely ignored his comments and led him toward the sitting area. "Would you like some water, iced tea or lemonade?"

"I'm fine, thank you," he answered, surveying the area in front of him. "You're right... You really have a beautiful view from here!"

"My husband and I love this place... We oftentimes come and sit here... As a matter of fact I was in a meditating mood when I saw your boat coming this way!" I said smiling.

"Well, I hope I'm not interrupting anything..."

"No, quite the opposite. I'm glad you're here. I've been thinking about an article I read recently on bitterness, and I'm sure you can help me figure things out... as you always do."

"Oh... is this another one of your introspections?" he asked, teasingly.

"It seems I can't hide anything from you!.." I replied, smiling. "Seriously though, have you ever dealt with bitterness in your life?"

"You know, having been a preacher didn't shield me from having feelings and emotions... Bitterness has certainly been one of them at one point in my life but I always chose not to let it master my heart. If I hadn't done that, I would have lost all peace of mind and my purpose in life... But tell me, why are you asking? What's on your mind?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I've been dealing with this issue for some time now... I'm losing much peace over it, and I've finally decided to do something about it."

"Good for you!... You've decided to take the bull by the horns!... I like that!.. Let me ask you, do you remember exactly what triggered this feeling?"

"I sure do!.. I won't get into the details here, but I still vividly remember the incident that happened many years ago. As for the most recent one which involved someone very dear to me, I must say the pill is harder to swallow... Just the thought of it rekindles the hurt and it's hard for me not to let go of the bitterness... In both circumstances nothing tangible was taken away from me... but my pride, I guess?..."

"Ah!... here we are again with the complexities of the heart... And who can understand it better than God himself?.. One thing for sure, it's not always easy to forgive and sometimes we need to face the reality that we are *unwilling* to forgive..."

"*Unwilling?*.." I asked, puzzled.

"Yes...*unwilling*..." he emphasized. "We think that the offense was intentional and that our offender is such a nasty person. We look for all kinds of other reasons, both real or imagined, to hold a grudge against that person. And as we keep convincing ourselves that we're in the right to feel this way and look for approval from the ones we confide in, our bitterness grows even deeper and can oftentimes develop into anger... Let me ask you, do you know anything about cankerworms?"

"Here we go again with your analogies!... I've heard of the name but I'm sure you will enlighten me on the subject!" I answered, shrugging my shoulders.

He smiled. "They are caterpillars of a North American moth. They consume the buds and leaves of trees and can be a major pest. They are very destructive. Bitterness does the same thing to our hearts. It can slowly but surely consume our lives until we lose it one joy at a time."

"So, what's the solution for putting an end to it?" I asked, curious to find out what he had to say.

"The first step obviously is forgiveness. That's the first thing God requires of us. But it's also the gift we give ourselves that enables us to stop picking at the scab, so to speak, and for the healing process to begin. God knows everything that happens to us in our lives, both good and bad. And he also knows how we feel at the precise moment someone hurts us. Who but Jesus himself experienced the same feelings while walking on this earth?..." he asked with sadness in his voice.

"And I'm sure you'll tell me that he forgave his offenders despite everything they put him through... But how can we compare ourselves to Jesus?... He was the Son of God and we're only humans..."

"And you think it was easy for Jesus?... He may have been the Son of God but he also came on this earth in human form. Have you ever stopped and think how Jesus must have felt when he was being rejected by his own people?... When he was accused of being against God when he, Himself, was God?... When his own people chose to free a notorious prisoner and condemned Him instead, even if he was innocent?... He felt the agonizing pain in his body. He was beaten, mocked, spit on, and hung on a wooden cross to die a cruel death... Can you only imagine what he went through?... He could have asked his angels to come and deliver Him but his love for humanity outweighed his sufferings... He knew he had to finish his mission on earth, and despite everything he endured, he still chose to forgive his offenders... That should put our own issues in perspective, don't you think?... It's evident that the source of bitterness differ with each person. It may be the result of great emotional or physical pains – perhaps even both - that they endured from someone. In any case, let me just say that Jesus understands and truly cares..."

"Oh, I can't even imagine myself going through all he went through... And how trivial is my pursuit for justification when you put it this way..." I said shamefully.

"May I also remind you that in Him we find abundant hope and the power to conquer what seems unconquerable?... Through Him we can do anything...and we *can* forgive if we are willing to humble ourselves and ask for his help. Forgiveness is part of what true love is all about."

"Love is at the heart of the matter, isn't it?"

"It sure is... *'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.'*"²

"It keeps no record of wrongs..." I repeated under my breath, now convinced that the outcome of it all boiled down to my response to this simple question: was I willing to obey God or not?... There was no doubt in my mind what my next step should be, but would I find the humility and the courage to do what he required of me?..

I was still lost in thought when the preacher slowly rose to his feet. "Well, dear lady, I'm sure you need some time alone, so I'll bid you farewell..." he said, smiling. "And please stay where you are... I know my way from here... I'm sure our paths will cross again..."

I was disappointed to see him leave but he was right, I needed some time alone. As I watched

him walk back to his boat, I was clearly reminded of a scripture I read many times: *'Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? And Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times but seventy times seven."*'³

I knew already that holding on to bitterness does nothing to heal the wound. It only amplifies it... I then realized that if I keep refusing to forgive, my relationship with the Lord could not grow to its full potential, I would still feel miserable, and everyone around me would suffer in some way or another... So, after much thought, it's with a contrite heart and tears in my eyes that I finally *chose* to forgive... It wasn't easy to follow through with my decision, but as I redirected my focus on forgiving my offenders instead of on the hurt they had caused, I found an amazing peace... I was set free from the pain I had been carrying in my heart... I finally found freedom from the bondage of bitterness, and what a great feeling that was!.. Oh, I can't say for sure I will not have flashbacks of these painful events from time to time, but I took the first step God required of me, and I can now rejoice in the blessed assurance that he's carrying on a good work in me. He's healing my wounded heart...

¹ How to Deal with Bitterness by Anne Peterson

² 1 Cor. 13:4-5

³ Matthew 18:21-22

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