

HURT AND BITTERNESS

Have you ever been hurt in your life? Hurt is a universal problem. It's impossible to find anyone in today's society who hasn't been hurt.

Back in the 1960's, a young man committed a horrible crime in a New York City park. An old man was resting on a bench reading a paper, and a 16-year-old boy pulled out a huge butcher knife, and stabbed the man about 130 times. When the police finally pulled the boy off the body, he was still stabbing him. They arrested him of course, and they tried to find out why he had done this.

For the longest time the boy wouldn't say a thing.

The police finally said to him, "Look, who was this guy?"

He said, "I don't know."

They asked, "Well, what did he do to you?"

"Nothing."

"What did he say to you?"

"Nothing."

They said, "You mean you just went up to a total stranger, who didn't do or say anything to you, and killed him?"

"Uh, huh."

With disbelief they asked, "Why did you do that?"

The boy said, "Do you really want to know? I've got an older brother, and he's really smart, and he's a great athlete, and he's good looking and he's talented and he's everything I'm not. My mother keeps on saying, 'Why can't you be famous like your older brother?' and I know there's no way that I'll ever be famous by being talented or smart or anything else. I just figured if I can't be famous that way, I'll be famous some other way. So I thought of the worst possible thing I could do and I went out and did it. At least my mother will remember me now..."

Now you could multiply this story of a young boy's hurt a million times across this country, and you could do it every day without too much exaggeration.

One little eight-year-old girl wrote me a letter. She said, "Can you help me? My father carries a picture around of my younger brother who is four and he looks just like Daddy. He also carries a

picture of my older sister who is 15 and very pretty. My Daddy doesn't carry my picture around at all. I gave him a picture of me. I cut it and made sure it would fit in his wallet, but he put it in a drawer. Is there any way I can get my Daddy to carry my picture?"

These are real hurts that happen every single day. Sometimes they happen to little kids, and sometimes they happen to older people. They happen in many different ways, but they all really hurt.

Hurt has got to be one of the major problems in society today. You can get hurt so badly that you try to cut yourself off from feeling altogether. I've met girls who've said, "Hey, I've been hurt too many times. I'm never going to love anybody again. Forget it." So you get hard and cynical. That's one way people deal with pain; they just withdraw themselves so that they won't be hurt again. But when you come to Jesus, God heals your heart and He takes the cynicism out of your life. You can once again open your heart to others and love again.

Even Christians can get hurt. Jesus was hurt. It's not wrong to be hurt, but the way you deal with your hurt makes all the difference in the world. Being hurt is a big enough problem in itself, but if that hurt is not handled in the right way, bitterness will set in. In the end it is bitterness, not "being hurt," that will destroy you.

Recognizing Hurt

It is really not that complicated to recognize hurt, especially if bitterness has set in. Let's think of some of the characteristics of a hurt 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 against people, 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.

Bitterness: The Seed Of Hell

One of the bad things about bitterness is that it doesn't stop... it keeps getting worse. It may only

start as a little seed of hurt, but then it grows and festers into a very dangerous thing. “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.” (Heb. 12.15) Question: Does bitterness just hurt the person who is bitter? Answer: No. The Bible says many people can be hurt by one person’s bitterness.

I worked in the streets with Teen Challenge in the 1960’s, and was sometimes out there until two or three in the morning. There were little eight or nine-year-old kids walking around, and I’d ask them, “What’s your father think about you being out?” They’d say, “I don’t know who he is.” And I’d ask, “Well what about your mother?” They’d say, “She don’t care. She doesn’t care if I come home or not.”

How Hurt Happens: Johnny’s Story

In order to understand this whole problem more clearly, let’s take a look at a typical pattern of hurt in today’s society. Many of the hurts that shape our lives start out in early childhood, and seem to multiply and compound as we grow older. Stories like this are acted out hundreds of thousands of times each day. The details change from person to person, but the hurt remains the same.

Johnny is going to be eight pretty soon, and his dad promises to take him fishing on his birthday. So Johnny gets his calendar and circles his birthday with a big red magic marker, and he starts marking off the days. Dad is busy and has a lot of stuff on his mind, so Johnny reminds him every few days, “Don’t forget we’re going fishing on my birthday.”

“Yes,” dad says, “We’ll get up early and I’ll take you.”

About a week before the big day, dad says to his secretary, “I’ve got a really great deal in the works, and I’m going to have to go out of town to finalize things; is there anything I need to do next week?”

The secretary says, “No, it’s pretty clear, except for someone’s birthday.”

He says, “Oh, it’s my kid’s birthday. I promised I’d take him fishing. Well, I’ll do that some other time, I’ve got to close this deal. Go buy him the most expensive fishing rod you can find. He’ll like that.”

On his birthday, Johnny gets up at 4:00 A.M. Dad is up too... but he’s packing for his trip. Johnny gets dressed in his fishing clothes and tip-toes down the hall. He finds his dad dressed in a suit. He’s got his briefcase and plane ticket in his hand and he’s about to run out the door. Johnny is sure his dad has made a mistake. “Where are you going Dad? Aren’t we going fishing?”

Dad says, “Oh, I forgot to tell you, I can’t do it today, but we’ll do it some other time. Do you know what I bought you? Here, hurry up and open it.”

Johnny quietly asks, "We're not going fishing?"

His dad says, "Well look, we can go fishing anytime. I want you to open up your present. I've only got a few minutes."

Johnny shuffles slowly to the package, and just stands there looking at it. Dad's about to miss his plane. "Come on, I can't wait much longer." So Johnny reluctantly begins to pick little pieces of paper off, bit by bit.

Dad says, "Look, I haven't got time to watch, but I'll see you in a couple of days, O.K.?" Dad flies off on his plane, and Johnny leaves the present half wrapped. He doesn't even open it.

A couple days later dad comes home and gives his wife a big hug and kiss. "Hi honey, how are things going? The deal went terrific and we're going to have lots of money coming in.

Where's Johnny?"

She says, "Oh, he's in his room. He's been there the last couple of days. I think there's some problem." So dad knocks on the door... no answer. Johnny has put up a wall.

It goes like this, "You hurt me, so I'm closing my heart to you. I'm not going to let you get through again." Invisible walls.

You know, God has given kids an amazing ability to quickly forget hurts and disappointments, but if they keep happening again and again, the hurt will probably develop into bitterness, and they *don't forget. They do not forget.*

Dad asks, "Hey, how did you like the present?"

Johnny says, "What present?"

"Didn't you open it?"

"No."

Dad is not too pleased. "Look, do you know how much money I spent on that thing? Do you know what any other kid would give for something like that..."

But what's happening inside Johnny's heart? Love is being cut off. He is thinking to himself, "I won't say 'thank you' because you hurt me." When we get bitter, we begin to lose respect and affection for the person who has hurt us, and we become very, very ungrateful.

Open Rebellion

It gets worse, by the way. It doesn't stop, it just gets worse. Now Johnny is 15 years old, and many hurts and disappointments have turned his wounded spirit into a bitter one. Dad comes in from work. "Hey, how about washing the dishes."

"Why do I have to wash the dishes?" Johnny complains.

"Because I want the dishes washed."

"Why can't someone else wash the dishes?"

"Because I'm your father and I'm telling you to wash the dishes, that's why!"

"I always wash the dishes, can't anybody else wash the dishes in this house?"

Do you see what is happening inside? Since Johnny has lost his love and respect for his father, he begins to reject his authority. Dad thinks, "What I've got to do is tighten the rope a little bit here. I've got to lay down the law here. We're going to have some respect in this house!"

So dad starts making stricter rules. "I want you to mow that lawn. And if you don't mow the lawn I'm going to ground you for a week." But Johnny doesn't mow the lawn. "Up to your room and stay there for a week."

A week goes by, and Johnny hasn't left his room. Saturday morning he comes down the stairs, and tries to pass by his dad fast so he won't see him. He's almost to the door when his father says, "Where do you think you're going?"

Johnny mumbles, "Out," and rushes to close the door behind him.

Dad bellows, "Come back here!" Johnny comes back, and dad says, "I told you that you couldn't go out for a week."

"It's Saturday; the week is over," Johnny answers.

"A week is over when I say it's over."

"My friends are outside waiting for me," Johnny says.

"Well you're not going to see them today. You're going to go back up in your room until I tell you you can come down."

And Johnny yells, "Go hang on your nose, Jack!" as he slams the door and stomps out.

About now dad realizes he really has a problem on his hands. It's called "open rebellion." Johnny has rejected his father's authority, and has become his own boss.

Bad Company

So now Johnny is his own boss, but actually he finds it kind of lonely and scary. He looks for other people to hang out with who are their own bosses, too. They all have something in common; loneliness and rejection of authority. Many times groups of kids like this are called gangs.

Their conversations go something like this, "My old man beats me. What does your old man do?"

"Well, he..."

"You know my old man does the same thing."

"Really? Well my old man..."

So their relationship is based on mutual rebellion and mutual bitterness. They need other rebels for encouragement. The gang doesn't always have to carry baseball bats and sawed off shotguns. It can be the local bowling league, or it can be political and be called the FDM or something like that. They can do all kinds of different things together; but because of their mutual rebellion, it's still a gang.

Now because Johnny has become his own boss with nobody telling him what to do, he can do anything he wants to. So he begins to carry out all the wrong desires of his heart that he's been keeping inside. He begins to flaunt his wrong. Instead of being a secret thing, he starts doing it all openly. Instead of secret sexual immorality, it is open sexual immorality. Instead of secret drug use, it's open drug use. He starts flaunting his rottenness, and begins to defend what he knows is wrong.

Romans 2:1 says you start pointing the finger at other people. "Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." I have a funny feeling that a lot of social protest movements come not out of compassion, but out of bitterness. If you can point your finger at enough people, maybe they won't notice that three of your fingers are pointing back at you.

The End Of The Road

Deuteronomy 5:16 is what most people call "the commandment with a promise." "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you." It would probably be a safe bet to assume that if you disobey this commandment, your days will not be prolonged, and things will not go well for you! Open rebellion and continual defense of wrong actions end up just where the Bible says they will; a short and lousy life!

So Johnny starts experiencing incredible mood extremes. Ecstasy one minute, and deep depression the next. Up and down; as high as a kite, as low as the bottom of a pit. And he can't figure out what's happening to him inside. He feels like he's going crazy sometimes. He can't handle it, and sees no way out. So Johnny starts thinking about suicide.

Suicide is the ultimate statement of selfishness. It says, "I'll punish the world by taking myself out of it. I'll teach them." Johnny may or may not kill himself, but unless he can find healing and restoration through Jesus, his ultimate end is a very sad one indeed. Every day, over 1,000 young people attempt to kill themselves in the U.S., and 6,500 a year are successful. Between 1955 and 1975, the rate of suicide among the young had increased 300%. Suicides used to be mostly college students, and then some high school students as well. Now seven and eight-year-olds are killing themselves.

The "Filing Cabinet Of Your Mind"

In bitterness, you focus on what that "horrible person" has done to you. You make a filing cabinet with their name that says, "Rotten Things This Person Has Done To Me." Now this is a big filing cabinet, and every time that person does even the smallest thing that hurts or bothers you, you file it in with the rest of the hurts. Usually we have more than one filing cabinet.

One of the causes of continual or persistent bitterness is that we try to balance out the guilt and blame. We say, "Well, I'm wrong, but they're worse. I have a good reason to be bitter; you don't know what they did to me." That's how we try to ease our conscience.

Many people use bitterness for revenge. That's why we hold on to it sometimes. "I'll show you, and you're really going to be sorry." But who is sorry first? You're the one who's killing yourself! You are not only hurt spiritually and emotionally, but physically as well. Bitterness and resentment often bring on all sorts of medical problems, such as ulcers and high blood pressure. People who carry deep bitterness around can't even enjoy a great meal. They sit down to eat, but all they can think of is the person who hurt them - they might as well be eating cardboard.

A middle-aged fellow came up to me at a street meeting one time. His eyes were all red and runny, he had about a three-day growth of beard, and he was drunk. He just looked like a wasted, blown-away, sensual, drinking mess.

He said to me, "My father was a rotten guy. He was drunk all the time and used to run around with all kinds of women."

I said, "Oh really?" And as I'm looking at him, I'm looking at his father. He'd become his father. Sometimes you don't do the same things, but you have the same attitudes and the same spirit, and exactly the same outlook on life as the person you hate the most. Why? Because you're always thinking about them. You will inevitably become more and more like those things you focus your attention on.

Getting Out Of The Bitterness Trap

How many of you have ever prayed “The Lord’s Prayer”? Do you know what this prayer says? It says, “God, You forgive me the way I forgive others.” *The thing that causes hurt to develop into bitterness is failing to respond to the help God can give at the time of being hurt.* To forgive someone doesn’t mean pretending you’re not hurt. That isn’t Christianity; that’s insanity. You need to be honest with yourself and admit that you’ve really been hurt. But how do we overcome our hurts?

Here are some basic steps:

1. Make a list of the people who’ve hurt you.

That’s pretty easy to do. Then underneath each name, write down everything they’ve done to hurt you. You may write things like:

- ◆ “My parents didn’t keep their promises.”
- ◆ “They gave more love and affection to other members of the family.”
- ◆ “My dad took out his bad temper on me.”
- ◆ “My wife tries to make me into something I’m not.”
- ◆ “My friend wasn’t there when I needed him,” etc.

2. Make another list of the things you have done to hurt them.

That’s the hard one, because we don’t remember those things as easily. We don’t want to. One of the hardest things to do is to really clear the debts between parents and children. You could put down things like: laziness, ungratefulness (when was the last time you ever thanked your parents; just called them and thanked them?), deceitfulness (what have you done behind their backs to make them distrust you?), etc.

Now, the point of making this list is, *it’s time you saw your wrong*. 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. We always play up how bad *they’ve* been, and how much we’ve been picked on. 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 good look at how you have hurt the Lord.

Once you finish your lists, you’ve still got the main job to take care of. And it goes like this... get down on your knees, and ask God to show you what you have done to hurt *Him*. Don’t hold onto your excuses. The blood of Christ cleanses *sin*, not excuses.

One of the most important keys to being able to forgive others and completely let go of bitterness is to understand that God knows what it is like to be deeply, deeply hurt, and yet He has *never* responded in bitterness or resentment.

Have you ever thought about how much He has been hurt? Remember that the better you know a person, and the closer you are to them, the more you can be hurt if they betray a trust or let you down in some way, deliberately or unconsciously. Now think about this: who is closer to your

innermost thoughts, and knows you more deeply than God. Himself? When you hurt Him, you have power to hurt Him more deeply than you could possibly hurt anyone else in the universe.

The Bible says, "The Lord was grieved that He had made man on the earth, and His heart was filled with pain." (Genesis 6:6) The phrase "heart filled with pain" literally means to have difficulty in breathing. God made this beautiful creation, and then He sees people not only hating and killing each other, but hating Him, too. And all that hurt goes deep, deep into His heart. We forget that God has a perfect memory. We only see a little bit; He sees it all, continuously. We only live a short time; He lives forever. When God looked at the world He made, He gasped with pain and horror. It hurt Him.

God really knows what it's like to be hurt. He hurts when we hurt Him, and He hurts when we ourselves are hurt. He goes through every hurt a person ever has; He goes through it! You may say, "Where was God when this happened?" I'll tell you where He was; He was hurting more than you were.

4. Pray, and ask the forgiveness of God and man.

This is not a complicated thing, but it is costly. You need a bit of time on your own, and you must do this first before you can help other people. Get out the list of how you have hurt God and others, and let the Lord break you. Ask God's forgiveness for these things one by one. And when you get finished, take the list and rip it up. It's a great feeling. Burn it if you like. Make a phone call to the people you've hurt and ask their forgiveness. Or better yet, talk to them in person. Even a letter saying you're sorry for how you've treated them will begin the work of healing.

There are lots of ways that you can help the person that you've wronged. As you reach out, you can actually start to care about them. You make the right choices as God shows you, and you'll find the feelings follow. Wait and see.

5. Destroy your files.

Remember that list of things that others have done to hurt you? Open the filing cabinets of your mind, take out all the files, and get rid of them. Tear up your list and burn it. You must release it all to God. Forgiveness is opening the filing cabinet before God and clearing the debts. "I'm not going to hold this. I'm not even going to keep a record of it." No record. That's what God does with you. Do you want Him to remember and recall all the debts He has cleared you of? You do the same. The Bible says, "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." (Matt. 6:14-15) It's a choice you must make in response to God's offer of forgiveness to you. What will you do?

OUTWARD SIGNS OF HURT	WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS
Withdrawl, communication breakdown	Proverbs 18:4
Ungrateful attitude	II Timothy 3:2
Stubborn, sulky attitude	I Samuel 15:23
Openly rebellious	Isaiah 14:12-14
Bad company. Needs other rebels for encouragement	Philippians 3:17-19
Heartily defends wrong actions	Galatians 5:19-21
Points finger to condemn others	Romans 2:1
Mood extremes	Job 10:1