

Overcoming Resentment

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1 Kings 2:8, 1 Corinthians 13:5, Matthew 18:21-22, Ephesians 4:31-5:2

Mt 18:21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Mt 18:22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. [NIV]

Eph 4:31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Eph 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Eph 5:1 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children

Eph 5:2 and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. [NIV]

It probably was the lowest moment in King David's life: His own son was leading a rebellion against him. Absalom, a charmer, persuaded many that his father was too old and ineffective to lead. So Absalom gathered an army and invaded Jerusalem to obtain the throne for himself. David and his army beat a hasty retreat, leaving the town in Absalom's hands. David would rather be humiliated in retreat than engage in a bloody civil war against his own son.

On the way out of Jerusalem, David must have thought: *"It can't get any worse than this."* But then insult was added to injury. A commoner by the name of Shimei taunted David as he fled the city. He stood on a hillside throwing clods of dirt and stones at the king and cursing him, saying: *"God is finally getting even with you for what you did to King Saul, you bloody traitor!"*

One of David's men growled: *"Let me go up and run that insolent coward through with a sword."*

David's response was amazing. He said: *"No. Don't kill him. Let him go. Maybe I'm just getting what I deserve."*

If the story ended there, we would praise David for acting in such a noble way: How wonderful to forgive such an offense and to let it go. But, sadly, such was not the case. The memory of that offense festered in David's mind for years. On his deathbed about a decade later, David speaks his final words to his son Solomon (1 Kings 2:8-9):

^{1Ki 2:8} "And remember, you have with you Shimei son of Gera, the Benjamite from Bahurim, who called down bitter curses on me the day I went to Mahanaim. When he came down to meet me at the Jordan, I swore to him by the LORD: 'I will not put you to death by the sword.'

^{1Ki 2:9} But now, do not consider him innocent. You are a man of wisdom; you will know what to do to him. Bring his gray head down to the grave in blood."

Those were David's final words!

^{1Ki 2:10} Then David rested with his fathers and was buried in the City of David.

David carried his resentment to the grave.

Ah, the problem of resentment: some people are never able to let go; they nurse their anger to keep it warm. They brood over wrongs until it's impossible to forget them.

Like David, most of us have had a Shimei in our lives, hurling insults, taking potshots and wounding us from the sidelines. We have been put down by others or treated unfairly or cruelly at some point in life. Perhaps we have been betrayed by those we love. The memories of those offenses and hurts are like videotapes constantly replaying in our minds.

First Corinthians 13:5 says, *"Love does not keep a record of wrongs."* That is an accounting term for entering an item into a ledger so that it will not be forgotten. Paul is saying love does not keep a ledger of offenses. It doesn't keep a scorecard. And yet, that is exactly what we are prone to do – keep score.

A man was telling a companion about an argument he'd had with his wife. *"Oh, how I hate it,"* he said. *"Every time we fight she gets historical."* *"You mean hysterical,"* replied his friend. *"No, I mean historical"* he insisted. *"She drags up everything from the past and holds it against me."*

That's resentment; it's not the way of love.

This may seem strange to say: we get some sort of perverse reward from holding on to our grudges.

Lewis Smedes, in his book Love Within Limits says that we get at least three rewards from resentment.

First of all, he says it makes us feel superior to the person we resent.

Secondly, it gives us an excuse for indulging in exquisite plots for revenge, such as hurting the person by withholding our ultimate treasure - our personal friendship. Don't we have fun thinking up ways we can get back at that other person?

And thirdly, says Smedes, there is a sense in which we want to remember past wounds to hurt ourselves. That sounds kind of strange, but we have a kind of masochistic tendency to enjoy the feeling of hurt that our memory rekindles. We actually savor our hurts. We brood over them while we are lying in bed and cannot sleep; we mull over them while driving our car; we have a strange, distorted pleasure in being hurt again. And we not only enjoy the painful pleasure of remembered hurt, we also enjoy feeling noble and worthy as the decent person who was wrongly hurt. Resentments serve a double purpose; they give us enjoyable pain, and

they give us a chance to justify ourselves.

And yet, if we perversely love to be resentful, we also hate it, for it makes us miserable. It depresses us. It robs us of gratitude. It poisons our relationships with our wives or husbands, our children, and our friends. And it can affect us physically as well as emotionally. Holding on to resentment can lead to an early death.

And so, if only for our own welfare, we need to let go. We need to forgive and move on.

"Forgive one another" says Paul, *"as God has forgiven you."* Jesus would have us place no limit on our forgiveness of others: we are to forgive not just 7 times, but 70 times 7.

The Christian response is to forgive and let go.

But how can you and I do that? That's the million dollar question. There is much I could say about the process of forgiveness – and it is a process – it is something we have to work through and takes time.

I would like to share a beautiful story with you that has helped me. It's from Lewis Smede's book: Forgive and Forget:

In the village of Faken in innermost Friesland there lived a long thin baker named Fouke, a righteous man, with a long thin chin and a long thin nose. Fouke was so upright that he seemed to spray righteousness from his thin lips over everyone who came near him; so the people of Faken preferred to stay away.

Fouke's wife, Hilda, was short and round, her arms were round, her bosom was round, her rump was round. Hilda did not keep people at bay with righteousness; her soft roundness seemed to invite them instead to come close to her in order to share the warm cheer of her open heart. Hilda respected her righteous husband, and loved him too, as much as he allowed her; but her heart ached for something more from him than his worthy righteousness. And there, in the bed of her need, lay the seed of sadness.

One morning, having worked since dawn to knead his dough for the ovens, Fouke came home and found a stranger in his bedroom lying on Hilda's round bosom. Hilda's adultery soon became the talk of the tavern and the scandal of the Faken congregation. Everyone assumed that Fouke would cast Hilda out of his house, so righteous was he. But he surprised everyone by keeping Hilda as his wife, saying he forgave her as the Good Book said he should.

In his heart of hearts, however, Fouke could not forgive Hilda for bringing shame to his name. Whenever he thought about her, his feelings toward her were angry and hard; he despised her as if she were a common harlot. When it came right down to it, he hated her for betraying him

after he had been so good and so faithful a husband to her. He only pretended to forgive Hilda so that he could punish her with his righteous mercy.

But Fouke's fakery did not sit well in heaven. So each time that Fouke would feel his secret hate toward Hilda, an angel came to him and dropped a small pebble, hardly the size of a shirt button, into Fouke's heart. Each time a pebble dropped, Fouke would feel a stab of pain, like the pain he felt the moment he came on Hilda feeding her hungry heart from a stranger's larder. Then he hated her the more; his hate brought him pain and pain made him hate. The pebbles multiplied and Fouke's heart grew very heavy with the weight of them, so heavy that the top half of his body bent forward so far that he had to strain his neck upward in order to see straight ahead. Weary with hurt, Fouke began to wish he were dead.

The angel who dropped the pebbles into his heart came to Fouke one night and told him how he could be healed of his hurt. There was one remedy, he said, only one, for the hurt of a wounded heart. Fouke would need the miracle of the magic eyes. He would need eyes that could look back to the beginning of his hurt and see his Hilda, not as a wife who betrayed him, but as a weak woman who needed him. Only a new way of looking at things through the magic eyes can heal the hurt flowing from the wounds of yesterday.

Fouke protested: "Nothing can change the past" he said. "Hilda is guilty, a fact that not even an angel can change."

"Yes, poor hurting man, you are right," the angel said. "You cannot change the past, you can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can heal it only with the vision of the magic eyes."

"And how can I get your magic eyes?" pouted Fouke.

"Only ask, desiring as you ask, and they will be given you," said the angel. "And each time you see Hilda through your new eyes, one pebble will be lifted from your aching heart."

Fouke could not ask at once, for he had grown to love his hatred. But the pain of his heart finally drove him to want and to ask for the magic eyes that the angel had promised. So he asked, and the angel gave.

Soon Hilda began to change in front of Fouke's eyes, wonderfully and mysteriously. He began to see her as a needy woman who loved him instead of a wicked woman who betrayed him.

The angel kept his promise: he lifted the pebbles from Fouke's heart one by one, though it took a long time to take them all away. Fouke gradually felt his heart grow lighter; he began to walk straight again, and somehow his nose and his chin seemed less thin and sharp than before.

He invited Hilda to come into his heart again, and she came and together they began again a journey into their second season of humble joy.

It's a beautiful fable that speaks truth to our need.

I wonder if it's possible for you and me to begin to see the people who have hurt and offended us in a new light, with "magic eyes." It won't be easy and we'll have to fight our way through a thick crust of anger and resentment, but perhaps we can begin, with God's help, to see the people who hurt us not as evil monsters, but as people who were not free to love us because of fear or prejudice, or insecurity, or emotional problems, or 101 other reasons.

Jesus had the gift of "magic eyes." That's why he could forgive those who nailed him to the cross. He could see inside their hearts with x-ray vision. He could see beyond the sin and the hurt they caused. He saw them not as villains, but as lost children who were very messed up and confused and who didn't even know what they were doing: "*Father, forgive them*" he said, "*for they know not what they do.*"

Our Lord can give us the gift of the "magic eyes." He can give us the power to forgive and start over with a person. But we must desire his help and ask for it. You and I have to go to him and say, "I can't forgive this person in my own power. Help me to forgive."

In the end, the power to forgive is a gift from God.

Let us own our own feelings of anger and bitterness and resentment, and confess them to God. Let us confess our own powerlessness to deal with them. Then let us pray that God will give us the grace to see people in a new and different light, so that our hearts will begin to soften, and joy replace the bitterness within... So may it be!