

How to Guard Your Heart From Bitterness

Recently a friend of mine hurt me deeply. I felt betrayed and disrespected. I tried to pretend the insult was no big deal, but inside I was seething. I can always tell when resentment has invaded my life because I start obsessing about the pain. When I went to bed that evening, I literally felt sore. All I could think about was retaliation.

But just before falling asleep I mouthed a prayer. I meant what I said, even though my feelings begged me to retract the words. I prayed: “Lord, help me to forgive ____.” Then, during the night I dreamed that I was enjoying a friendly conversation with this person. When I woke up, it felt as if we had really been talking!

It was a miracle. I realized the dream was God’s way of softening my heart and taking out the offense. The Lord gave me the grace to forgive.

Perhaps you’ve been insulted, overlooked, stabbed in the back or mistreated—and now bitterness is poisoning your soul. Don’t let it spread any further. You can nip your offense in the bud by following these guidelines:

1. Don’t nurse your grudge. It feels good to our flesh when we replay an offense in our minds and then fantasize about hurting the other person. But if you star in and direct this dramatic movie in your head, you are going to be making sequels for months and years until bitterness makes you sick. Pull the plug on the whole production now.

2. Let go of all revenge. C.S. Lewis said: “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” No matter how a person offends you, be humble enough to recognize that you’ve probably done the same

thing to someone else before. Quit sharpening your knives. You will be tempted to think about hurting the person, but remember that those knives are hurting you worse than anyone else.

3. Don't spread your bitterness. Sometimes you may need to vent to a close friend about what happened, but this isn't so you can ruin the reputation of the person who hurt you. If you share your pain with someone because you need advice, don't seek sympathy or go to those who have animosity toward the person who hurt you. That's like mixing toxic chemicals! Instead, go to mentors or friends who are mature enough to tell you the truth. You may feel mistreated, but the speck in your brother's eye may actually be a log in yours. A true friend will tell you that you are overreacting or being unreasonable.

4. Pray for good things to happen to the person who hurt you. Jesus urged His disciples to love and pray for their persecutors (Matt. 5:44). That's a foreign concept in this age when we unfriend people on Facebook just because they forgot to invite us to a party. Calm down, let go of your petty outrage and ask God to bless the person who offended you. Forgiving prayer will feel like a warm salve applied to your wound.

5. Reach out and expect to repair the relationship. Jesus places a high priority on reconciliation. He wants us to get along. If you are praying and you remember that someone has something against you, Jesus said, "First be reconciled to your brother" (Matt. 5:24). On the flip side, He said if someone has sinned against you, "go and reprove him" (Matt. 18:15).

In both cases Jesus commanded us to confront. And confrontation is never easy. We'd rather just avoid each other. We'd rather "bury our hatchets," pretending that our nasty attitude is gone just because it's well-hidden under our

Sunday morning smiles. But true forgiveness is not burying a hatchet while we still hate a person inwardly; forgiveness requires us to surrender the hatchet to Jesus.

6. Ask for God's forgiving love to fill your heart. One of my favorite preachers, Corrie ten Boom, struggled to forgive the Nazis who beat her in the Ravensbrück prison camp. After the Germans surrendered, she met a former Nazi guard in the street, and he told her he had become a Christian. He reached out his hand and asked her for forgiveness. She couldn't look at him.

But then Corrie remembered Romans 5:5, which says, "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit." She realized that when we don't have the capacity to forgive, God gives us the love. Jesus changed Corrie's heart.

Corrie added: "God's love is stronger than my hatred and unforgiveness. That same moment I was free. I could say, 'Brother, give me your hand,' and I shook hands with him, and it was as if I could feel God's love streaming through my arms."

Jesus didn't promise a life without offenses. Hurt happens. But He provided the way to keep resentment from ruining our lives. As we enter this new year, make a conscious decision that you will embrace a life of miraculous forgiveness. {eo}