

“Carrying a grudge is like being stung to death by a single bee.” ~ William H. Walton

This is a really funny statement...*except it's not funny*. If I were to sit down and compile a list of all of the issues for which I have counseled Christians in over a quarter century of ministry, do you know what (I am positive) that would reveal? I am very sure that the issue of bitterness and forgiveness is probably 10X more common than every other single issue *combined*.

Not surprisingly, when I came to Mt. Carmel, I discovered very quickly that our church is no different than any other church where sinful Christians are gathered as a church family. Hurting people hurt people and hurt people hurt back. Here in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, folks have just as hard a time letting go of hurt to extend forgiveness to people who have hurt them (sometimes repeatedly) and just as hard a time *walking in* forgiveness toward other people as the folks in SW Virginia, SW Georgia, SE Alabama, Central Alabama, North Carolina, Missouri, and every other place I've lived.

And (just for added convenience), I'll let you in on another secret you may not know. We are commanded by Jesus to forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts – but most of us really *don't know how* to forgive. Someone once likened Christians to a group of porcupines (ironically, the proper name for such a 'group' is a “prickle”) trying to hug each other. Seems like the harder we try, the more we irritate and hurt one other.

But, this is *nothing new* – the root of it goes all the way back to the very first sin of our very first parents. Ever since the Fall, every single one of us has been sinful from the moment of conception. Meaning? We are *not* sinners *because we sin*...we sin *because we are sinners*. If we have been born again by the Holy Spirit, we received the free gift of Jesus' righteousness at the moment of repentance and trust in Jesus. However, we will nonetheless continue to battle sin *in our lives* for the *rest of our lives*. What's this have to do with the family of God? Well, anytime a couple of hundred sinners regularly and consistently gather in one place, we have a very predictable tendency *to hurt* each other – *it just happens*.

Ok, in light of the fact that we *are going to* hurt one another, what happens if we *do not* learn to keep short accounts and forgive one another from our hearts? Well, to borrow the words of William Walton from above, we find ourselves walking around with a bumblebee inside our shirt. And, every

time we see the one (or ones) who deeply hurt us, that bitterness bee *stings us*. And, when the bitterness bee stings us, we *bristle* with anger.

Now, since we are in the South, we will usually speak and act politely to their face. But, what do we tend to do once they get out of earshot? If we are not careful, we will run them into the ground...to other people. Of course, we might throw in a “bless their heart” to make ourselves feel better...since we just disemboweled their character with the dull knife of our tongue.

But, *why*? Why does the bitterness bee sting us...*just by presence of the person, or even the mention of their name*? Question – are we *willing* to truly ask the Holy Spirit (and willing to listen to His answer) if we have *truly forgiven* the other person *from the heart*? The uncomfortable truth (that is stubbornly true regardless) is that sometimes we just *don't want to forgive them*. The reason is that we somehow believe we are holding the other person prisoner unless and until we *decide* to set the prisoner free.

Now here's the truth. If we nurse a grudge and refuse to forgive, it *does indeed* hold *someone* prisoner. And, if we choose to forgive the other person, it *does indeed* set the prisoner free. But. What we fail to realize is the person who hurt us *is not* the prisoner. When we refuse to forgive – *we are imprisoned by bitterness* – and we are reminded every time we feel the familiar sting of the bitterness bee.

So, why not *set the prisoner free* by truly forgiving those who have hurt us? Jesus commands it. And, if we truly forgive the other person from the heart, we will realize (probably to our great surprise and delight) that the emancipated prisoner – *is us*.

Your fellow pilgrim,

Heath