

Let Go of Resentment

January 9, 2011

Texts: Heb. 12:1-3, 1 Cor. 13:4-7, (1 Kin. 20:42-43, 21:1-29)

As we start the new year we are talking about things we can let go of as New Year resolutions. That is a great way to start your list. You are making a list aren't you? How else will we reach our goals if we don't plan to succeed in reaching our goals? "Plan your work, and work your plan." Today, we are addressing another anchor to let go of before it takes us to the bottom – **RESENTMENT**.

I believe we can learn something from the story of King Ahab. Old King Ahab was a merry old soul, except when he wasn't getting his way. He took the throne of his father, Omri, as king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 875 BCE and reigned for 21 years. By secular accounts he was a fine military and political leader reigning longer than most leaders in the Middle East. He had a strong respect for the religious traditions of the Jews, that is until he laid eyes on Jezebel, the princess daughter of the King of Sidon's, a Phoenician beauty. Wow, she must have really been something to behold!

Who cares she wasn't a Jew, nor did she look like one either. She was "sassy," with an attitude to match her wardrobe. So what's a few priests friends with idols? They can't stand in the way of "love at first sight." Besides, it's good foreign policy to help keep the peace with our powerful and wealth neighbors on the coast. They have a Navy so we don't need one; sailing was never the Jew's long suit anyway. Remember Jonah?

Jezebel was a "Mover and Shaker" for her time, if you know what I mean. When women in Israel were supposed to take a back seat to men, she didn't waste any time making her presence felt. Her wedding present was a temple for her favorite priests, 850 of them in all, so they could teach everyone to worship like she did, which wasn't worship of Yahweh. (Sound like anyone you know on TV?) It was for the worship of Baal, with high steeples dedicated to Asherah, the male and female Canaanite gods. The Book of First Kings 16-22, says that he was the worst king to rule over the Northern Kingdom of Israel, from a religious perspective.

From then on He just kept making moves that put him crossways with Yahweh. Ahab was feeling very proud of himself after he defeated the Arameans but spared their king for his own political advantage. That was until a prophet of Yahweh stopped him on his way back home for his triumphant return. He received a severe tongue-lashing from the Lord for not trying that king as a war criminal and executing him. The text says that instead of returning triumphantly, he slunk back into town "sullen and resentful."

That seemed to have become a habit of his. When he tried to buy an old family vineyard from his neighbor, Naboth in Jezreel to turn into a vegetable garden and was flatly refused, he took to his bed all "sullen and resentful" again. Like I said, he was a merry ol' soul, except when he didn't get his way. Jezebel, you remember Jezebel (Ooo la al!), said to him the equivalent, "Are you a worm or the King of Israel? What are you moping around for? I will give you that vineyard as my wedding present to you." And, so she started a sleazy campaign to get Naboth out of the way. In the matter of days it was announced that Naboth had left the premises, so to speak, and it was vacant and free for the taking. Ahab was a "merry ole soul" again as he took off for Jezreel, in a cloud of dust, robes flopping in the breeze, to collect his wedding gift, a vegetable garden, Ooo, Ahaa,... at the price of an innocent man's life. Guess what, that's right, a prophet of Yahweh, this time ole Elijah himself, stopped him in his tracks again and spoiled his fun.

“Is that you, Elijah, my arch enemy? You found me again!” said Ahab.

This time the message got very personal very fast.

“Yes, it is me,” said Elijah. “Guess who knows what you did? God, and here is what God has to say to you, ‘You are going to find out what it felt like for Naboth, because you are **“going down”** in the same place that poor Naboth did. And, not just you, but all the males in your house will die a miserable death. As for Jezebel, she will be a fancy feast for the dogs right here in Jezereel.”

This time Elijah really got to Ahab because he realized you can’t hide anything from God, so he genuinely repented with sack cloth and fasted. Talk about sullen, he was devastated at what was coming on him. And you know what, God saw how truly sorry he was that he spared Ahab’s life. But, the damage on his family couldn’t be erased and would eventually destroy everyone in his lineage. God said “the punishment for the fathers’ sins is on the children to the third and fourth generation,” (Ex. 34:5).

Resentment is a poison that infects a family and it gets passed down from generation to generation if it is not stopped. Resentment is a nicer way of saying **hatred** for someone. It is holding a grudge and refusing to forgive that person or family. In Moses time it often led to blood feuds that lasted for generation after generation. Remember the Hatfields and the McCoys’ fude that lasted over a hundred years. No one remembers why it started. God gave Moses the law of limited retribution, or “an eye for an eye” to stop that kind of evil from propagating in Jewish society. But, God also insisted they forgive each other’s offenses. The law called for someone to forgive the same person up to three times in the same day. Do you remember when the disciples asked Jesus how many times they should forgive someone in a day? They suggested seven times as an extremely generous number, but Jesus said, “70 times 7.” Unbelievable! Who can count that high? Maybe that was the point – we are not supposed to count someone’s sins against us. We are supposed to forgive them. But, it’s easier said than done, as I often say.

Eleven years ago I had an emotional crisis that made me feel like I couldn’t go on living. I was stressed out and not functioning very well as a pastor or husband or father. I knew I wasn’t happy because my loving family kept asking me why I wasn’t happy. I keep telling them, “**I am happy. Can’t you tell?**” The Church I was serving didn’t know what to do with me either so they asked that I be moved after only two years. I can’t blame them, though there were lots of problems there too. But, I knew I couldn’t go on like that. With Lou’s help and that of a good counselor, I found help to allow me to gradually take a look deep into my heart. It wasn’t easy. Very painful. But, what I found there shocked me. I discovered I was still harboring resentment against my father and others in my early life. I had stuffed it down and denied it for years. After all, I am a good Christian and an ordained minister, for Pete’s sake! I am supposed to be perfect, aren’t I? That is what a lot of people seemed to think, anyway.

I am so glad that I had the time to go to my father and forgive him and ask his forgiveness. It was just in time, because his health began to go down not long after that. Since I am the son who lived near them, I decided I needed to be the caregiver for both my parents. Those years were so much different than before. I found a love for my father I didn’t know was possible. He wasn’t a different person, but our relationship grew warm and loving after all those years of resentment and pain. You see, he had a very painful relationship with his father who was an alcoholic and absent from the family much of the time just to mention the main factors. It is a wonder my father survived. But you see, his sins carried down all the way to me. I hope and pray they stopped with me, but frequently I wasn’t a very pleasant father to my children. We have very good relationships now because they have found the grace to forgive me as I did my father.

The beautiful poem found in the middle of one of the Apostle Paul’s letters that is very well known as the “Love Chapter” of 1 Corinthians, chapter 13 addresses many aspects of a life filled with the love

of God. It even touches the issue of resentment as it gives examples of love in action in a person's life listing both positive and negative examples. In verse 4 he begins a list,

Love is patient; love is kind;

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude;

It does not insist on its own way;

It is not irritable or resentful;

It does not rejoice in wrongdoing,

But, rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things,

*Hopes all things, **endures all things. Love never fails.***

Old King Ahab, didn't realize it, but by calling Elijah his "enemy" **he was really calling God his enemy.** God tried over and over to get his attention so he wouldn't keep making those serious mistakes, offences toward God, even if they did seem to be good politics. But, his resentful attitude finally cost an innocent man his life; that is what it took to get through to him what he was doing. That wasn't all the damage either, but at least he did do something to change his own life. That must have been a lot to bear on your heart.

Resentment is not nice; it is just hatred in a nicer wrapping. It is so dangerous that Jesus warned that if we hate someone, **we are in danger of punishment in hell!** Why, because that is the same attitude that leads to murder, just like lust is the same attitude that leads to adultery. None of us want to admit that those feelings ever occur to us, myself included. But, don't they? My life is a lot happier and healthier since I made up with my father. Unfortunately, that attitude can creep into other relationships without realizing it. That is why it is so important to stay close to God by reading the Bible, praying, meditating, listening to good teaching and preaching. All those are avenues for God to speak to our hearts and show us those areas of our lives that are out of step with God's love and will. God is gentle if we are open and listening carefully. If we are more like Ahab we are harder to get through to and it takes some much more powerful things to get our attention. Unfortunately, sometimes those may be very hurtful and destructive to the lives of others. Seeing how our actions hurt others, especially those we love, can be a very powerful motivator. I have visited with some persons who have had to face the reality of the cost of their sins, hatred, un-forgiveness, lust, whatever it is. It starts small and will grow into an infectious disease that hurts everyone around.

But, Jesus gave us the remedy that works every time. He said forgive without counting. If we are counting, we are not forgiving. We may not be able to forget the offense, but we can forget how many times we forgive. That's what God does for us, each and every time we ask for forgiveness, it is already gone, washed away by Jesus' blood.