

What you Fail to Forgive Will Poison You

Jean Johnson

“Pastor Ted, would you be able to come and pray with my mother, Hazel? She doesn’t have much time left on earth,” asked Ann.

Ann sat by the phone, hands clasped beneath her chin as she contemplated Pastor’s visit. *Maybe, he will inspire my mother to forgive my father.* She had watched as her once vibrant and beautiful mother morphed into a rigid untrusting soul.

As a young wife, Hazel’s husband had several grievous affairs. Hazel divorced him, but she held deeply crushed emotions in her heart. *How could John do this to me? He cheated night after night with another lover, and pretended to be my husband. I will not forgive him or trust others ever again.*

Twenty-five years later, she continued to nurture hurts of un-forgiveness with strong resentment towards her ex-husband. Hazel lived as a hermit in a tiny rundown house. A variety of weeds hugged her dusty windows. The tarnished gate led to her paint-chipped front door. Broken pots and other junk lined the pathway. Hazel would never leave home if it weren’t for needing food, provisions, and medicines. Ann was her only visitor.

Twice a month, Ann stood at her front door clutching her purse and coat, trying to calm her nerves before driving to her mother’s house. *God help me to stay loving.* Ann dreaded the cranky conversations with her mother, but she loved her and knew it was the right thing to do, to continue to check on her.

Knocking on her mother’s decrepit door set her heart beating rapidly. Old dirty drapes hung tightly closed on each window, encasing the room with the darkness of a tomb and reeking of stale food and rancid cat litter. Clutter occupied each available surface.

Trips into town became an ordeal that Ann would rather avoid. Hazel needed help, so she

choked back the tears and helped her mother shop for supplies. Hazel's embittered heart shone through with a steady stream of foul, polluting words toward anyone near her.

Their first stop was Wilton's General Store.

"Good day, Hazel," said Rusty.

Hazel snorted back, "What's good about it? This lousy heat is enough to give me a stroke!"

A few children tiptoed to the counter to see the sparkly candy in the jars. One of them lost his balance and stepped on Hazel's foot.

"Get out of my way, you young varmints!" shrieked Hazel, spittle flying from her twisted mouth.

The children forgot about the candy and scurried out of the store.

Joe and Charles lounged on wooden chairs outside. Joe's face tightened as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Charles, what do you suppose happened to Hazel? She's turned into a wrinkled and bitter old woman."

Charles thought about it for a moment. "There sure has been a drastic change."

As Pastor Ted sat by her bed, Hazel recounted the events of her husband's betrayal and explained how her heart had formed layers of bitterness, encasing it like a stone. She would not forgive him. She had fallen into the poison pit of bitterness, her life a bed of misery. She was drained of joy and peace.

Pastor Ted asked, "These hurts seem as if they happened yesterday. How are they so fresh in your mind?"

"Pastor," she gasped for breath, "I can't help but meditate on these things day and night since this happened. I am beginning to realize I have made my life a living hell. Every day, I curse John nonstop in my mind, and I hate him intensely."

Tears streamed from Pastor Ted's eyes. "Hazel, God can help you let this go and forgive

John. Only then will you find true freedom. Will you pray with me today?"

In those last hours of her life, Hazel cried out to God to free her from the pit of bitterness, and forgave John's offenses.

Pastor called Ann to her mother's bedside to say goodbye.

Hazel reached out her hand to her daughter and wheezed, "Ann, today I have found peace. Please do not harbor pain toward your father and become what I have been. Let God set your heart free and fill it with peace. I love you Ann." One last gasping breath and Hazel closed her eyes as if she were asleep.

The encounter with Hazel weighed heavy on Pastor Ted's heart. He knew he must go back to his church with a story about the poison of un-forgiveness.

The following Sunday, Pastor Ted began his sermon. "Congregation, I stand before you with a message which is not for the faint of heart, but is necessary to avoid falling into the trap which Satan sets for the sincere Christian."

As Pastor spoke, Ann wrote down the most important points of his sermon. She knew her mother's last words were right. Ann knelt by her seat and asked God to forgive her as she forgave her father. She felt God's peace cover her.

Ann went home and prepared to share her notes with her dear friend who was struggling to forgive *her* father. She met with Suzy on Wednesday. "Suzy, I'm so glad to see you. There's something on my mind I want to share it with you."

Suzy looked confused.

Ann shared her father's unfaithfulness while she was a young teen. She told how lack of forgiveness affected her mother, slowly transforming her into a negative, bitter woman. Tears seeped from her eyes. "I hardly recognized my mother. Distrust corroded her heart and prevented others from coming near her. She was absorbed by years of pain and misery. Last week, she died peacefully because she chose to ask for forgiveness for her bitterness and offenses toward my

father.”

Suzy thought for a moment. “How did your father’s affairs affect you?”

Reflecting on the question while dabbing tears from her cheeks, Ann replied, “At the beginning, I hated my father. I couldn’t understand why he hurt my mother so intensely and left us to fend for ourselves. I felt entitled to hold onto my hurts. My father didn’t deserve forgiveness. It took years. Pastor helped guide me towards finding freedom in forgiveness.”

Suzy nodded. “That’s how I feel right now with my father. I can’t stop rehearsing the painful memories of his verbal abuse to me as a young teen. He ruined my trust of men. He left me feeling broken and unworthy, ashamed of being a woman.” Tears rushed down her cheeks. “How can I ever forgive what he did to me?”

Ann gently placed tissues in Suzy’s hand. “I asked God to help release the burning pain inside and help me forgive my father. I couldn’t do it on my own, nor can you. Let me share my pastor’s notes. They’ll help you understand why it’s important to forgive one another, no matter the offense.”

Ann read aloud from the notes she took from Pastor Ted’s sermon.

“What offenses we fail to destroy will gradually destroy us.

When we choose not to forgive others for offenses done, our Heavenly Father will not forgive us. (Matthew 6:14-15)

We give a foothold to Satan when we allow anger and un-forgiveness to linger. (Ephesians 4:26)

Un-forgiveness leads to resentments and then to bitterness and hatred, which defiles our spirits, and those around us. (Hebrews 12:15)

Harboring resentments is like nurturing a deadly virus, which spreads unawares through our body. It may make us feel superior and justified toward the one who hurts us. However, like a slow poison, it kills our love for God and others. It is a strong source of long-term depression.

Resentment and bitterness makes us a slave to the one we hate, by keeping us tied to them

emotionally. We become what we hate.

God's ways are perfect and He knows the depths of what this trap does to us. Christ paid a high price to offer us forgiveness through the work of His cross, and we pay a higher price when we choose to nurture offenses. He is the ultimate judge over man's deeds. (Romans 12:19) Only God's power can change our hearts and renew our minds."

Ann squeezed Suzy's hand. "Today, I'm free of bitterness and un-forgiveness. My heart carries no malice towards my father, and I can freely pray for him. I want this freedom for you, too, my dear friend."

Suzy looked away in silence. Her expression softened. She must have seen the peace in Ann's life. "Will you pray with me?"

Jean Johnson's avid love of reading and writing throughout her life stemmed from those early childhood years when she read stories to her blind father. In May 2014, Jean graduated with English, honors. Currently, she writes short stories, articles, devotionals, and poems.