

Gospel Centered Forgiveness-Part One

Bitterness is the biggest obstacle to practicing Gospel Centered forgiveness. Bitterness has ruined lives and held Christians in a type of prison. In this sermon I will attempt to show what bitterness is, how it is experienced and the consequences of remaining in bitterness.

Key Words: Bitterness, Forgiveness, Conflict, Anger, Biblical Counseling

Key Scripture: Heb 12:15; Deut 29:18; Eph. 4:30-31

Introduction

Corrie Ten Boom and the SS Guard

I. What is bitterness?

A. Various Defined

1. Pop-Psychology defines bitterness as the absence of happiness.

a. Pop-psychology website defined bitterness as a lack or absence of happiness. PC approach.

b. In other words, the poor bitter person is just unhappy, not filled with anger and hatred.

2. Self-Confrontation-Bitterness is related to anger and demonstrates a great dissatisfaction with God's sovereignty in your life.

a. If God is sovereign even over concentration camps then what does that say about my life and the times I have been a genuine victim of other's sins or of what happens to me in a sin-cursed world?

3. Bitterness is a type of revenge.

a. It is often a feeling of resentment directed towards others for reasons of discrimination, neglect, jealousy, or trauma. Often times, bitterness comes after a bad experience." Wikipedia

b. When we brood over perceived injustices (real or imagined) we harbor revenge. We want a certain pound of flesh. We forget that God says vengeance is his (not the same as seeking justice).

4. Bitterness is sin.

- a. Often times we refuse to admit that bitterness is sin.
- b. It's too easy to justify especially when we hear a story like Corrie's.
- c. Bitterness is tied to powerful emotion and so we do not "feel" responsible.

5. A conflict we want to hold on to.

- a. Cherishing the hurt
- b. brooding, remembering, recycling

B. Bible Examples of Bitterness

1. Jonah (Jo. 4:9)

But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."(Jonah 4:9 ESV)

- a. A Conflict he did not want to let go of (cherishing the hurt)
- b. brooding, remembering, recycling, depression, self pity

2. Naomi (Ruth 1:11-13)

But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me."(Ruth 1:11-13 ESV)

- a. Bitterness (like all sin) is directed against God
- b. It's blaming God although many would admit it.
- c. Bitterness is just one label that describes a downward spiral. The brooding, the remembering, the recycling produces depression, self-pity and other things such as thoughts of revenge.

3. Bitter person believes they have the right to be bitter.

a. Naomi suffered great personal loss and she thinks that “entitles” her to bitterness.

b. Jonah too, “feels’ entitled to bitterness as well and it’s reflected in his language.

c. In both cases, Naomi and Jonah are being governed by emotional responses to God’s sovereignty.

(1) They are in fact “judging” God as unfair and unjust.

(2) This is a bad plan as it reveals the evil thoughts of the heart:

(3) For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. [All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:21-23 ESV)

(4) Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. [32] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31-32 ESV)

C. Unbiblical Ways of Dealing with Bitterness

1. Ventilation

a. General idea is that anger\bitterness is neither good nor bad, just something that happens to you.

b. It builds up to a certain point it has be released like water from a pump, or better, from a fire hose.

c. Thus the ‘ventilator’ lets off steam and explodes with rage, striking out physically or verbally at people or things.

2. Slow seething-Slow seething is accumulating offenses and brooding on them.

a. The inward person is poisoned-it’s entrenched anger.

b. Brooding means to be preoccupied with depressing, morbid, or painful memories or thoughts. (Cherishing the hurt)

3. Gossip-Slander

a. verbally attacking and discussing and gossiping about those you believe hurt you.

b. Type of ventilation. In psychological terms a type of passive aggressive behavior that is sin.

4. Catharsis

a. The catharsis approach is talking to others about your bitterness in order to ‘get in touch with your feelings’ and to release the bottled up emotion.

b. Probably the most common psycho-therapy for bitterness or anger.

5. Self Righteousness

a. My bitterness is righteous indignation and therefore justifiable.

6. Forgiving God

a. Some Christians influenced by psychology believe it may be necessary to “forgive God.”

b. Biblical counselors disagree.

II. Scripture describes Bitterness as Poison

A. How Bitterness becomes a Personal Poison

1. Bitterness is what we feel when we perceive another person sins against us or we believe that God is dealing with us unfairly.

2. Bitterness points to the perceived sin of another.

3. The guilt of the other is real. Our perceptions become our realities.

4. The reality of the perception gives way to brooding, recycling, and remembering.

5. The severity of bitterness is based on sin that somehow relates to you personally.

B. Scripture

1. Bitterness is a bitter taste that defiles many.

a. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; (Hebrews 12:15 ESV)

b. This is one of the most common passages in Scripture used to warn against the emotional state of bitterness-it reflects the “ewwwwww, that’s bitter” idea of a rotten taste and the fact you cannot get the rotten taste out of your mouth.

c. Sometimes roots are poisonous and when consumed the result is sickness and /or death. It adds up to the observation that the bitter person is sick, poisoned and that the sickness is contagious for it defiles many.

“Many a man has lost his wife because he hated his boss. Many a mom has lost her kids because she hated her dad. Many an adult has lost his friends because he hated his enemies. When unforgiveness becomes bitterness, you had better get some body bags ready because unforgiveness destroys everyone in its path.” P. James MacDonald

2. Bitterness is unbelief.

a. Heb. 12:15 is written in the context of a person falling away from the faith.

b. The only way one falls short of the grace of God is by unbelief-not trusting God.

c. Unbelief in the true God, means the worship of some other God. Deut. 29:18 bears this out and is another occurrence of the word “bitterness.’

(1) Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be

among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit,
(Deuteronomy 29:18 ESV)

(2) In a modern context the controlling idol is one of control. The bitter person demands control. Like all other “fruit on the tree” sins bitterness has its roots in idolatry. If the idol is not repented of (worship disorder) then the bitterness will not be either.

3. Bitterness and its obvious relationship with other sin.

a. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
(Ephesians 4:31-32 ESV)

b. Bitterness, like these other sins have more in common with the unregenerate than with the Christian. (See Eph. 4:17-20)

c. Term breakdown

(1) Bitter- The poisonous root from which wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice come. Bitterness as used here is a smoldering resentment directed against God’s sovereignty vertically speaking and horizontally speaking against others.

(2) Wrath-It’s a deeply settled indignation that stokes the bitterness inside. It’s the everyday choice to keep the bitterness alive. “It’s the I won’t forgive, I won’t let go, you’re gonna pay” attitude that seeks to punish and punish and punish.

(3) Anger-I think of anger as the temporary explosion of wrath. Chronically, explosive people are bitter people. Anger management for them is simply learning to not explode and does nothing for the heart issues of wrath and bitterness. Anger is putting a fist through the wall, breaking stuff, verbal murder, etc. It erupts and dissipates and often the root is bitterness and thus unforgiveness.

(4) Clamor- The bitter person wants everyone to know, to hear their grievance. A type of revenge really, “you hurt me and now you are going to hear me.” This can be literal or passive aggressive.

(5) Slander-is related to clamor, but simply means “evil speaking.” It’s another word for revenge or vengeance often in the guise of justice and self-righteous indignation. It’s where we get our word for blaspheme. God says it’s reviling. It’s speaking words fully intended to injure someone. “I’m going to say this and I don’t care you it hurts.”

(6) Malice-MacArthur notes that malice is the general Greek word for evil-the root of all vices .

In the movie version of *Last of the Mohicans*, Magua, the Huron war chief wants to burn at the stake English captives, including a woman, taken in battle. Magua recounts how earlier in his life his village was attacked by the English and Mohawk Indians allied with the English. Magua lost his mother, father and family and was made slave to the Mohawks. He pretended to become Mohawk but all the while cherished bitterness and revenge in his heart.

Now, he was arguing with another Huron chief about his right to burn the English who hurt him and his family and his right to revenge.

Hawkeye-the hero of the story, argues back correctly noting that Magua has become the very evil that caused him the pain in the first place.

That’s malice. The evil I hate is what I’ve become. And the root is unforgiveness.

C. Other Consequences of Bitterness

1. Unresolved conflict gives a place to the devil.

a. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, [27] and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27 ESV)

2. God’s name is blasphemed

b. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”(Romans 2:24 ESV)

3. Bitterness is an indication that we may not be saved.

a. ...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:12-15 ESV)

“Bitterness is one of the most nefarious results of anger. It is a leprosy that consumes the soul and eats away at grace, forgiveness, and mercy. It is variously translated "rebellious", "discontented", "disobedient" Bitterness should not be embraced, worked through or understood- it needs to be repented of!"—
Elyse Fitzpatrick in Women Helping Women—

III. How Can You Tell if You are Bitter?

A. Ten Questions to Ask Yourself

1. Do I mull over the details of past offenses by others?
2. Do I bring up past offenses (as weapons) to those I have chosen to forgive?
3. Do I gossip about how others have hurt me?
4. Do I desire revenge against those who hurt me?
5. Am I quick to lovingly confront those who sin against me?
6. Do I view the sins of others in the light of God’s mercy on me?
7. Am I easily offended by others?
8. Do I frequently think about past offenses against me or how life is unfair to me?
9. Do I diligently seek to get along with those who have hurt me in the past?
10. Am I quick to forgive?

B. Corrie Ten Boom and the Rest of the Story

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein.” he said. “To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!”

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had

died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

IV. Steps to Forgiveness (Gal. 6:5; Matt. 5:21-23; 2 Cor. 5:9, 18-21)

A. Recognize that Bitterness is our Heart Problem

1. For each will have to bear his own load. (Galatians 6:5 ESV)

a. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' [22] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5:21-22 ESV)

b. We do have a choice as to how we respond to the circumstances of life that God has sovereignly ordained. We can choose to be bitter and we can choose to see bitterness for the gross evil that it is.

c. Once we own our evil desires and see the sin for what it is, then we are ready to take the next step in God's appointed means to do away with bitterness.

2. Let Christ rule rather than the emotion.

a. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. (2 Corinthians 5:9 ESV)

b. Bitterness is a powerful emotion and either it will dominate you or love for Christ will. The pleasing Christ is not some blind

performance issue designed to earn his favor. Pleasing Christ is the outcome of love for him and what He did for you.

3. Remember that Christians have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

a. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; [19] that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. [20] Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. [21] For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:18-21 ESV)

B. Recognize that God expects us to change and that change is possible. (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:12-14)

1. to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, [23] and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, [24] and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Eph. 4:22-24, ESV

2. We will never change until we have the desire to change. Corrie's experience illustrates that she did not want to hold bitterness in her heart. While salvation is God's work alone, sanctification requires the desire to be like Jesus no matter what.

3. [12] Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, [13] bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Col. 3:12-13, ESV

C. Practice Forgiveness from the heart (Matt. 18:21-35)

For next week

Questions for the Community Groups

1. Share an experience you may have had with bitterness. How did you deal with it?
2. How does knowing something about God's sovereignty help in dealing with bitterness? What is your understanding of God's sovereignty?
3. How would you begin to help someone who does not know Christ deal with their bitterness?