

# Husbands, Do Not be Bitter Towards Your Wives

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*Colossians*

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**Bible Text:** Colossians 3:19  
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We are returning this morning to Colossians 3:19 so please turn in your copies of God's word to that text, Colossians 3:19.

19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.

The essential doctrine of this very plain text must be understood and expounded in light of the larger companion text found in Ephesians 5. In light of that passage, it becomes evident that Christian husbands are called by Christ to demonstrate his own amazing love for the church in the way they love their particular wives, and not just the manner of their love but the constancy of their love. We are to love our wives in a way that causes them, our children, those who know us, to see the love of Christ.

Earlier, verse 18, indicates that the Lord Jesus commands wives to assume the place of subordination and dependency with respect to their husbands. That is not owing to any intrinsic inferiority but rather it is owing to the design of God that marriage would reflect the saving union between Christ and his church, and so wives must relate to their husbands as the church relates to Christ, from a posture of neediness and submission. The greater weight of responsibility, however, is upon the husband. Husbands must so care for their wives, so love their wives, that the resulting happiness and prosperity of their wives would testify to the power of God's grace; will demonstrate that no one is a loser who follows Christ; that he loves his people; that he meets their needs; that he gives them true and lasting happiness.

Now, brothers, this is a heavy responsibility that is laid upon us. It's really too much for us. It's too big. It's too great. It's too heavy. And yet the requirement stands. God doesn't apologize. He doesn't lessen the responsibility. This is our responsibility. And the reason it stands without apology is because Christ has given us the Holy Spirit. Do you really believe in the Holy Spirit? I mean, do you really? I mean, do you really believe in the Holy Spirit to the extent that when you read commandments like this and you get into them and you say, "That's too much for me," that if you honestly say, "But the Spirit of God will help me. I can do this. I can do everything required of me because of the Spirit of the living Christ who indwells me." God doesn't diminish this responsibility, he doesn't apologize, he lays it on us, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and

gave himself for it and you can do it because my Spirit dwells in you." Don't dismiss this text because you think it's too hard. It is too hard for you but it is not too hard for the Spirit of God who dwells in you.

Now, last Sunday we were unable to address the last part of the text which reads, "and do not be bitter toward them," and it may very well have been that many of you looked at that and said, "Well, that's such a small thing. I suppose the pastor ran out of time and he won't come back to that." Wrong. "Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them." That little warning, as much as just about any statement in the Bible, reminds us of how real the Bible is, how timeless, how contemporary the Bible is. Here the apostle, by the Spirit, identifies one of the most subtle and damaging temptations that husbands face: the temptation to be bitter toward our wives. And this temptation unless it is resisted and even put to death, can become the cause, the occasion of numerous other temptations and numerous evils. We must take this seriously. We must deal with every tendency to be bitter toward our wives.

Now, ladies, as you were thinking, "Well, here's another husband sermon and I'm glad my husband is going to get it this morning, and I can shift," I assure you, bitterness is a temptation for every one of us. The text is addressed to husbands, I'm going to speak to husbands but you listen. Bitterness is a malicious cancer and none of us are exempted from the temptation. There are four points to this morning's study. Point 1: this temptation defined; point 2: some possible reasons or occasions for this temptation; point 3: why this temptation must be defeated; and finally: how this temptation may be killed.

Point 1: the temptation defined. "Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them." To assist your understanding of what we are being called to avoid, please turn over to Revelation 10 and I will read just a portion of this text. Revelation 10:8, "Then the voice which I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, 'Go, take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the earth.' So I went to the angel and said to him, 'Give me the little book.' And he said to me, 'Take and eat it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth.' Then I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter." The term "bitter" in this passage obviously speaks of a sour stomach and all of the discomfort and side effects that a sour stomach may produce. I suppose that all of us have had the unpleasant experience, hopefully not over this past weekend, of eating something that was very enjoyable to the taste but anything but enjoyable to the digestive system and perhaps we soon became very sorry that we had eaten this sweet thing and determined that we would never ever eat it again. Well, that is the kind of thing that Paul is speaking about in our text in Colossians 3:19, only he is referring to an emotional bitterness, a spiritual bitterness.

We have several indications of this emotional or spiritual bitterness in the Scriptures. In 1 Samuel, for instance, 1 Samuel 1, we are told that Hannah "was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish." Do you remember why she was bitter? Because she was unable to have children and her husband had two wives and the other

wife was able to give him children and Hannah was not and the other wife mocked her because she could not give him children and she was in bitterness of soul and prayed and wept. We are all acquainted with the very difficult visitations of Providence upon the man Job. In Job 7:11 he said, "I will complain in the bitterness of my soul." Now, he later regretted that he complained but he had felt bitterness in his soul. In Proverbs 17:25, we read that, "A foolish son is a grief to his father, And bitterness to her who bore him." A foolish son who goes into the far country and behaves wickedly, he is a bitterness to his mother.

It's important to understand that bitterness is a great deal more than disappointment. Bitterness is larger than sadness. Bitterness is pain. It is a deep, cutting, nagging, unrelenting pain. It's something we feel deep in our emotional selves. It is severe. That's what makes it dangerous. Because the feelings are deep and because they are severe and because they are unrelenting, they are dangerous to our souls like rancid food is dangerous to our bodies. Emotional bitterness can give rise to destructive evils in our lives as we try to deal with it. As we react to this deep, severe, unrelenting, nagging pain, we can do some very bad things.

Bitterness of soul produces aversion, strong reaction, even hatred. Romans 3:14 describes unregenerate people in this way, "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." Unregenerate people don't have anything that can give them real deep happiness. They try this and they try that and they tell you it's good for a little while but then it turns bitter and they become disillusioned and they are disgruntled and out of their mouths comes the expression of their discontent with cursing and expressions of bitterness. James in chapter 3 of his epistle likens cursing, cursing to bitter water coming out of a polluted well. Cursing is an expression of bitterness in the soul.

Turn, please, to Ephesians 4. We keep going back to Ephesians because Ephesians really is a twin to Colossians. Look at the end of Ephesians 4, verse 31, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And [instead] be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." And notice, bitterness is contrasted with kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness. Bitterness is the opposite of those things. Bitterness is the opposite of kindness and tenderness and forgiveness.

That has led me to conclude that bitterness cannot coexist in the soul with God-like love. God-like love and bitterness are so incompatible that you can't have them both. If you're going to love with God's love, bitterness has to go. If bitterness is going to be allowed to stay in your soul, then you cannot love as God loves. They can't coexist. At the risk of overdoing an unwelcome image, you cannot have a happy and eager appetite for that very food that once so recently made your stomach sour and nauseous. That food that did that to you creates in you an aversion. You don't want it. You don't choose it. And if somebody is going to serve it to you, you beg to be excused. Beloved, bitterness in the soul can produce that same kind of aversion toward people, people we ought to love, people we are commanded to love, but bitterness creates an aversion to them. We are repelled by those people. We don't want to be in their presence. We don't want to have

them close to us. We don't want to be around them. That's what bitterness can do to your soul.

Well, I hope that this brief discussion has been helpful in helping you to appreciate what Paul means when he says, "Husbands, do not be bitter toward your wives. Don't allow your spirits, your affections to become soured toward your wives, embittered." Well, now point 2, some possible occasions for this temptation. Earlier I referred to it as reasons, there really isn't an adequate reason for a Christian to ever become bitter but there are some occasions in which we think it's okay for us to be bitter. When we're talking about husbands toward their wives so this is only suggestive but I want to name four occasions for the temptation to become bitter.

The first, the temptation to bitterness and this one is hard, but the temptation to bitterness may arise from the fact that a marriage, a particular marriage, was ill-formed and ill-advised from the beginning. Perhaps neither spouse loved Christ at the time of the marriage and they weren't thinking according to truth and righteousness when they became husband and wife. Perhaps the marriage was rooted more in passion or in unrealistic dreams that, in itself, giving love rooted in a sober consideration of the facts. And sometimes that happens with professing Christians. Sometimes supposedly Christian marriages are born out of very strong natural affections, natural attraction coupled with a rather superficial consideration of the relevant matters. But whatever the blameworthy factor, sometimes, sometimes people come back from their vacations thinking secretly within themselves, "What was I thinking? When I agreed to marry this person, what was I thinking?" Sometimes that question arises years into the marriage, "Why? Why did I marry this person?" The recognition of having made an error in judgment can easily give rise to bitter despair in the soul. "I have blown it. My whole life is ruined. Any possibility of marital happiness is gone. It's impossible for me. I made a wretched mistake."

Well, Christians are not allowed to think like that and there are a couple of reasons why, okay? A couple of antidotes to that kind of bitter despair for the Christian. 1. We have the conviction that our heavenly Father has ordered, preordained all the affairs of his children's lives and that he has done so for their good, not their harm, and that even includes our sins. You say, "Now, how can that include our sins?" I don't know how, okay? But I'll tell you this: if it doesn't include our sins, it doesn't include the largest part of our lives. If the only hope we have that God will bring good out of all things is that God will bring good out of all the good decisions we've made and the good things we've done, we don't have a lot of hope. "God works all things together for good to those who love him and are the called according to his purpose," and, bless his name, that includes our mistakes, our bad judgments, our sins. So if you find yourself in what you now consider to be an ill-judged marriage, realize that your heavenly Father has ordained that relationship. You are there with good purpose as far as he is concerned and maybe there are some bitter experiences growing out of your bad judgment but God's grace is greater than all of that and you have hope that God put you there for your good and not your ruination. Bless him. Trust him. Persevere.

The second antidote to this bitter despair coming from the realization that maybe you shouldn't have married the one you married, is the simple fact that Jesus Christ wills that we keep our covenant commitments. So even if you blew it, he doesn't give you the license to walk away. It's his will that you stick to it but he'll give you the grace to stick to it joyfully, not just to endure it, to enjoy it. He has the power to make it good for you. So instead of giving in to bitter despair, we must trust our Father's good pleasure, his sovereign will and the present grace of Jesus Christ and throw ourselves into the marriage expecting that good will come. We must war against temptations to bitterness and hopelessness by prayerful faith.

2. Another possible occasion for bitterness in marriage may be disillusionment. Disillusionment. Maybe there is no question but what God led you in the marriage: you prayed, you sought to make judgments according to the Bible but now you're in the marriage and you have become disillusioned and I'm referring now to a husband who has a growing awareness that the woman he married is not that persistently holy, universally sweet, unfailingly patient, thoroughly disciplined, unshakable, mature saint that he thought. When he married her, he saw nothing but bright lights, a perfect woman. Not long into the marriage, that was shaken a little bit. A year or two, it was crushed. One writer put it like this, "In particular, the husband must scrupulously avoid the temptation to resent his wife being the person she is, to become bitter or angry when she turns out to be like him, a real human being, and not merely the projection of his own hopes or fantasies. Malignant bitterness is sometimes the backwash of unrealistic expectations." Did you get that? Malignant bitterness in the soul is sometimes the backwash of unrealistic and unholy expectations, expectations that it would be impossible for any human being to satisfy including those who are filled with the Spirit of God.

Remember when John the Baptist was cast into prison and Jesus didn't come to get him out? John became temporarily disillusioned with Jesus and he sent one of his disciples to go to Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one? Are you the one who is coming or are we to look for another?" And Jesus sent back word to John that John's expectations for the Messiah when he came the first time, his expectations were wrong. Jesus was the Messiah but John's expectations for what the Messiah would do in his first coming were wrong. Husbands, don't entertain unfounded, unrealistic expectations for your wives. Such expectations can lead you to disillusionment resulting in a bitterness toward your wives. You are disillusioned. She is not that perfect, universally sweet woman that you thought. She's got an edge to her and you are disillusioned and that disillusionment can quietly become bitterness of your soul. Most of us would be wise to understand that our wives have much greater cause to be disillusioned than we do.

A third possible occasion for bitterness is the experience of repeated disappointments in perhaps just one or two areas of married life. Repeated disappointment in just one or two areas of married life. I once knew a professing Christian husband who became so disappointed at his wife's chronic tardiness that he threatened to divorce her. Now, what was her problem? She was late. Does anybody else have that problem? I've spent a good 25-30% of my life waiting on my wife. That's okay. That's okay, she's worth it. This man conceded that in other areas his wife was a gem; she was a good woman, she had been a

faithful mother to their children but his bitterness over this one disappointment, her tardiness, particularly where he was concerned, led him to conclude that she was being willfully defiant toward him and that led him to conclude that he would not stay married to a defiant woman. What happened to that marriage? I don't know because that husband took his wife and children out of our church because the elders could not convince his wife to be always on time but neither would we concede that he had ground to divorce her. Now, that may sound silly but, my dear ones, the point is that recurring disappointment in just one or two areas of marriage if those disappointments are nurtured and brooded over in the soul, can produce bitterness in the heart.

A fourth occasion for bitterness on the part of husbands and, men, listen to this well, please: a fourth occasion for bitterness on the part of husbands is sinful lust for other women or the resentment that their wives do not look like certain other women. Now, I agree that wives ought to do what is reasonable to maintain their physical beauty, however, the most reasonably diligent wife cannot compete with a devoted seductress, particularly a devoted seductress who is 10, 15, 20, 30 years younger. And when a husband seeks such seductresses in his lust through the internet or through certain clubs or magazines or movies, when a husband in his lust seeks out seductresses he is opening his soul to moral and spiritual cancer, a cancer that has a power to destroy his love for his wife and eventually to destroy his own conscience. The willing indulgence of sexual lust can turn the loving contentment with a wife of one's youth into bitter dissatisfaction and even disgust and a man can go from loving the wife of his youth to not being able to tolerate her appearance, being disgusted by her looks because he has chosen to set his lust upon a seductress or multiple such women. And when that is allowed to happen, it only happens because the husband chooses for it to happen. He chooses to lust. He chooses to focus upon multiple women. He chooses to compare his wife to those women. When it happens, it happens because of the willful choice of the man, but it also brings brutal emotional injury to the wife. Brutal. And sometimes it will cast a man's soul into hell. Beware of lust.

Okay, those are four occasions that sometimes give rise to the temptation to bitterness on the part of husbands. Now, thirdly, why this temptation to bitterness must, must be defeated. Why it cannot be tolerated. I cannot enlarge upon this. My time is going too quickly but let me just state these matters and you take them. I pray that God will help you to take them to heart. Bitterness where permitted to lodge within the heart of a man destroys marital love and marital happiness, and unless it is mortified, it can eventually destroy the man himself.

Bitterness gives expression of itself in a perpetually discontented spirit. A bitter husband is a husband who is never pleased. You can't please him. Bitterness gives expression of itself by harsh words, cutting words, vindictive words, and vindictive actions. One modern translation translates the word "bitter" in our text by the word "harsh." Bitterness is more than harshness but harshness is often an expression of bitterness. Bitterness makes a man unwilling to be patient with his wife. He is unwilling to be forbearing with her. He's unwilling to be tolerant. He cannot and will not be understanding toward her. To the eyes of the embittered soul, everything that is said and done by the object of that

bitterness is displeasing. If a man has become embittered toward his wife, his wife is wrong. Everything she does is wrong. Everything she says, everything she prepares for dinner, it's all wrong because his soul is bitter. Bitterness nurtures resentment. Bitterness nurtures disaffection. Bitterness unless defeated will ultimately give rise to hatred. Hatred. One last word as to why bitterness must be defeated. Beloved, a bitter spirit is inconsistent with saving grace. A bitter spirit is an unloving spirit and love is the preeminent grace of a regenerate soul.

Turn quickly to Hebrews 12. And I hope you understand that husbands are not the only ones who are liable to bitterness. Wives can become bitter. Friends can become bitter. Brethren can become bitter. Pastors can become bitter. Hebrews 12, look at verse 14, "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord," now here's a continuation of that thought, "looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled." Here the Holy Spirit warns against a bitter spirit arising and causing trouble within the church, a spirit very much contrary to the pursuit of peace. And notice in the text the Holy Spirit connects a root of bitterness with falling short of the grace of God. Husbands, beware. If you yield your spirit to bitterness toward your wives, that may reveal some alarming things about the real state of your heart. It points every husband is tempted to bitterness. If we give in to bitterness, if bitterness gains dominion over our hearts, it says some terrible things, not just about the love we have for our wives but it says some terrible things about our souls.

The last point and I'll be very brief: how do you kill this temptation to bitterness? Surely, it would be cruel for me to say all that I have said and not to give you some direction for killing bitterness. And the first thing to be said about this is that you can kill bitterness and you must because you are commanded to do it. The word of God is very plain, "Do not be bitter toward them." And it will not do to say that bitterness just silently crept in over your spirit and captured your heart and you didn't even know it. That won't do because you are commanded not to become bitter. This is your duty and what God commands, God enables through Jesus Christ. If you will seek Christ, he will help you. Without Christ, you will not be able to fend off the temptations, but by the help of Christ, you can and you must obey this directive.

Now quickly, here are three things that you must do to prevent ever becoming bitter toward your wives. 1. Foremost, do what this text commands you, "Husbands, love your wives." The chief way to prevent bitterness is to love them. If you really love them, bitterness will not be tolerated in your soul. Devote yourselves to loving your wives. When you are tempted to be peeved, say to yourself, "I'm not going to be peeved, I'm going to love this woman." Concentrate on those reasons for loving her that we set before you last week: the fact that she is a unique and wonderful creature of God; the fact that God gave her to you as his own special gift; the fact that she is a co-heir of eternal life with you and you're going to spend eternity with her; the fact that she labors so much, so tirelessly for you and for your children. Love her by prayer, by careful deliberate thought. Determine you're going to love that woman and you're not going to entertain anything contrary to love in your spirit toward her. Love her.

Secondly, forgive her. Forgive her. Be tenderhearted toward your wife. Forgive her faults just as God in Christ has forgiven your sins. You are told to love your wife the way Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. Why did Christ give himself of the church? Why? It's because the church needed to be forgiven. The church was a sinful bride and the only way the church could be forgiven was for him to take the punishment due her sins. But the whole point is Christ gave himself for his bride because his bride had sinned and needed to be forgiven. If you're going to love your wife the way Christ loves the church, you have to forgive her. That has to be your disposition always. No matter what she says or what she does, your disposition must be toward forgiveness. Fundamentally, bitterness is a result of choosing not to forgive. Fundamentally, bitterness is a result of choosing not to forgive real sin or often it's not real sin, it's perceived sin. If it's something we don't like, we call it sin. It's not even real sin. 98% of the time we ought to be throwing blankets of love over our wives' sins and maybe there will be 2% of the time that we need to talk to them about their sins. If we need to talk to them, talk to them, but approach them in mercy and approach them with a predetermined mindset, "I'm going to forgive you. Even if you don't agree with me, I'm going to forgive you because I love you and I am committed to you."

Men, it simply cannot be that we will foment within our spirits an unforgiving spirit toward our wives or anyone else. Now, am I looking at some men this morning who have such a spirit and perhaps it has been there for a long time, one or two things, some disappointments, you can't get over it? You'd better get over it. If you don't, it will turn to bitterness and bitterness will turn to resentment and to hatred. If there is anything for which you have not forgiven your wife, I urge you, resolve it before evening worship tonight. Let me change that, resolve it before your nap this afternoon. No, resolve it before you eat this afternoon. In other words, resolve it as quickly as you possibly can.

The third thing you must do to avoid bitterness is be thankful, be habitually thankful for the wife God has given you. Refuse to focus on her weaknesses and failures. Focus rather upon her virtues and graces and the multitude of her sacrifices for you. Focus upon all the good that God has brought into your life through that woman. How can you be bitter when God has given you such a precious gift? Shame on you. Shame on me. Husbands, love your wives. Rejoice over your wives. Praise God for your wives. And if you love them and you are thankful and you are forgiving, there won't be any space for bitterness.

Let's pray.

*O Father, how grateful we are that you never become bitter toward your children notwithstanding the multitude of our grievous sins; sometimes the same sin committed 70 times 7 in the course of a day, and you never become bitter. You never stop loving us. You never stop being merciful and kind toward us. Your love is amazing. Surely, we ought as husbands, particularly, to be willing to go to the Lord Jesus and to ask him for the grace to love our wives like he loves us and to rejoice over them and to forgive them freely and to be full of gratitude for them. Father, if any of us have given way even in the most subtle and secret way to bitterness, it would be so kind of you if you would break*



*our hearts over that, if you would expose it and make it intolerable to us, give us grace to vomit it out and to be done with it. And if our marriages have been ruptured because of our bitterness, help us to confess our sins not only to you but to our wives and to begin the process of healing. Thank you for your word, Father. How perfect and wise, how contemporary your word is. Give that word success in all of our hearts to the glory of your name through Jesus Christ. Amen.*