

## **Uprooting the Root of Bitterness**

Ephesians 4:31-32; 1 Peter 4:8

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Has bitterness and anger taken root in your life and are they destroying you from the inside out? Perhaps some of you are living with a life-long bitterness that goes back to childhood. Perhaps some of you are living with a bitterness that is more recent. Whatever the case, bitterness and the anger that flows from it will sap the very life from you. The fruit of the Spirit cannot grow from out of the root of bitterness. How do you defend yourself against bitterness and anger when you who have been betrayed, when those close to you have lied to you and deceived you, when you have been abused and misused, attacked, slandered, or when you have watched your loved one suffer greatly from some deathly disease, or suffer from some travesty of justice? Dear ones, the power of Christ's death and resurrection can sweeten the waters of bitterness and anger that have taken root in your life.

The main points from our text are the following: (1) Identifying the Root of Bitterness and Its Fruit of Anger in Your Life (Ephesians 4:31); (2) Replacing the Root of Bitterness and Its Fruit of Anger with the Forgiveness of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:32).

### **I. Identifying the Root of Bitterness and Its Fruit of Anger in Your Life (Ephesians 4:31).**

A. The sins listed here by Paul are insidious enemies to your spiritual growth in Jesus Christ: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking, and malice. They are all related, but yet distinguishable from one another. They are all to be "put away" (or destroyed). If bitterness takes root in our life, you can count on these sins to follow right behind bitterness.

#### **B. What is bitterness?**

1. This Greek word for bitterness comes from a root which means to cut. It is a resentment that cuts to the very heart of a person over some perceived or real injury done to you. It is like a smoldering flame that lies beneath the surface ready to ignite into an angry outburst of words and actions. It is called "a root of bitterness" in Hebrews 12:15, for like a root it is growing beneath the surface, like a root it is spreading the more that it is fed, and like a root it is sapping you of good fruit in your life that might otherwise be produced because your strength is going to the root of bitterness instead of to the fruit of the Spirit.

2. It has been said that bitterness is the resentful spirit that refuses reconciliation. Bitterness will not forgive and it will not be reconciled to the offender even when there is evidence of a genuine repentance on the part of the offender. Such bitterness will make a life miserable and will make one miserable to those around him/her. Such bitterness will often be directed toward God as well, spewing out invectives against His justice, faithfulness, love, goodness, and care.

#### **C. How does bitterness take root in a person's soul?**

1. When you believe you have been mistreated or wronged (whether betrayed by your husband or wife, whether passed over by your boss for a promotion you deserved, whether abused as a child or as an adult, whether embarrassed or made fun of in public, whether rejected by peers because you are a "narrow-minded Christian", or whether you have suffered the loss of a loved one or the loss of your own health), you believe you are justified and warranted in holding a grudge against the one who has wronged you. You judge you are right in doing so—you have a right to be bitter and resentment toward that person. The truth is, however we never have the right to be resentful and bitter against any one. God never gave us such a right. In fact, God calls it sin.

2. When you see no remorse, no repentance, and no sorrow for what someone has done

to you. In fact, he/she has escaped all human accountability (has gotten away with it). You may feel the only punishment may be your bitterness toward that person. But dear ones, bitterness is not the other person's sin; it is your sin. You may have been wronged (seriously wronged), and yet you are responsible for how you respond to that sinful mistreatment of you (or a loved one). You can either respond with bitterness that merely focuses on how that person has hurt you, or you can respond with a readiness to forgive the undeserving (like Jesus). Bitterness will destroy you if you only see the sin committed against you, but not the sinfulness of your own bitterness.

D. How can you recognize this enemy of bitterness within you?

1. You live in the past over the way you were mistreated by someone or wronged by someone, rather than learning from the past that you might live wisely in the present.
2. You remember the details of what was done to you and find yourself rehearsing those details in your mind. And you not only remember the details, but you draw others into that web of bitterness (Hebrews 12:15—"many be defiled").
3. You become very angry (with a vindictive anger) when you are reminded of that situation or of the offender. Remember that your bitterness does not affect the offender at all, but rather the offender continues to control you through your bitterness and misery. As long as you are bitter, you are under the offender's power.
4. You may even have certain health consequences like high blood pressure, rapid beating of the heart, insomnia, or panic attacks when you reflect upon how you were mistreated.

E. What will bitterness cost you?

1. Your communion with Christ and answered prayer.
2. Your growth in the fruit of the Spirit (good fruit cannot grow from this root).
3. Your health (spiritual, emotional, and physical).
4. Your relationships (in marriage, family, and friendships).
5. Once it has been nursed and allowed to take root in your heart, it will not be easily uprooted (like every other sin that we ignore, tolerate, and protect). Paul does not say to put away "some bitterness", but rather to put away (destroy) "all bitterness".

F. There are other enemies that will follow bitterness against which Paul warns: wrath, anger, and clamour.

1. In Ephesians 4:26, Paul had stated, "Be ye angry and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath." Paul distinguishes between a righteous and God-centered anger and a wicked and self-centered anger; for there is an anger that the Christian may have and yet not sin in having it; but there is also an anger that the Christian may have and which is sinful—this anger is to be "put away" before you lay your head down upon your pillow to fall asleep (how marriages would be so greatly benefitted if only couples obeyed that single principle of being reconciled to one another by the end of the day, and not carrying over that anger into the next day, when yet another disagreement arises). You are called to keep short accounts in order that you become not bitter and then sinfully angry. Some decisions we may sleep on, but sinful anger is never something to sleep on.
2. How are righteous anger and sinful anger distinguished?
  - a. First, righteous anger has chiefly the glory of God in view, whereas sinful anger has chiefly the offense committed against me in view.
  - b. Second, righteous anger is under the control of the Holy Spirit, whereas sinful anger is out of control (whether beneath or above the surface).
  - c. Third, righteous anger pleads for God's mercy to be shown to sinners that they might repent of their sin and be granted the forgiveness of God, whereas sinful anger wants to get even with

others (their repentance and forgiveness is of no concern).

3. Look briefly at the individual words used here for sinful anger (Ephesians 4:31).

a. **“Wrath”** (*thūmos*). This is the boiling type of anger that just snaps at someone. It is an outburst. Someone cuts in front of you in traffic and you are calling them names and letting them have it with your horn and other unseemly gestures.

b. **“Anger”** (*orgē*). This type of anger is not so much an outburst, but an anger that lasts longer. It is an on-going anger toward someone. *Thūmos* arises suddenly and may subside more quickly, whereas *orgē* arises more slowly and continues longer.

c. **“Clamour”** (*kraugē*). This is the type of anger that leads to riots (as we have seen in cities of our own country).

d. Paul adds as well that **“evil speaking”** (slander, lying, sinful criticism, gossip, etc.) and **“malice”** (a desire to injure others) are also to be put away (and destroyed) in the life of the Christian. All of these forms of anger, evil speaking, and malice follow when bitterness takes root in your life. You can identify the root once you see the fruit.

## II. Replacing Bitterness and Its Fruit of Anger with the Forgiveness of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:32).

A. Bitterness and sinful anger cannot stand in the presence of kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness. Let us consider these three graces that Christ has already purchased for you to destroy the bitterness and sinful anger in your life.

1. **“Be ye kind one to another”**. Kindness is the fruit of a mild and gracious heart that speaks and lives the truth in love in order to win a brother rather than simply to win an argument or debate (and crush an opponent)—a heart that seeks if at all possible the more gentle approach over the more harsh approach in correcting others.

2. **“Tenderhearted”**. Rather than seething in bitterness and anger (put that off) and rather than having a hard heart (put that off), put on a tender heart toward the offender, which is a heart of mercy. Grace is God giving you what you do not deserve—eternal life. Mercy is God not giving you what you do deserve—hell. A tender heart does not give the offender wrath, but rather shows mercy and opens the door to forgiveness.

3. **“Forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”**

a. Biblically, forgiveness is a promise not to hold a sin or offense against the offender any longer. It is to cast the sin of another behind you and to remember that sin against the offender no more, so that there might be reconciliation. That is how amazingly God forgives (Jeremiah 31:34; Micah 7:18-19). And we are to do likewise.

b. Divine forgiveness is only possible due to the grace and mercy of our God. Dear ones, divine justice demands a just punishment—just as human justice demands a just punishment (Romans 6:23). And that is precisely why Christ was sent into this world as the God-Man—to pay the punishment which sinners deserved (sinners chosen in Christ Jesus before the world began). That divine forgiveness costs the believing sinner nothing (we cannot earn it or deserve it). Why? Jesus paid the debt of our sin and condemnation in full upon the cross.

c. If you would root out all bitterness and sinful anger from your heart (which a true Christian will desire and seek to do), then you must forgive one another, “even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” When you refuse to forgive those who have sinned against you and have repented of their sin, you are evidencing that you have either not been forgiven by God or that you don’t truly understand God’s forgiveness (Psalm 86:5; Luke 17:3-4). And even if there is not repentance, love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

B. How do you prevent bitterness and sinful anger from taking root in your heart?

1. Recognize bitterness and anger for what it is—your sin. Don't blame others for your bitterness and anger. It is your sin. Others may have sinned against you, but it is you that is bitter and angry.
2. Repent of and seek forgiveness for bitterness and anger as an offense against God and your fellow man.
3. Earnestly pray that God would grow you in the fruit of kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness before which bitterness cannot stand.
4. Understand that you do not have to become bitter and angry against God or man over what others have done to you (consider Joseph—Genesis 50:20). God brings the attacks of others against you that you might grow in the fruit of kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness and learn by experience the forgiveness of Christ (the gospel) in your life. The sweetening of the bitter waters of Marah (Exodus 15) is a beautiful picture of the sweetening of our bitter hearts by the cross of Jesus Christ. That alone will sweeten the bitterness in your heart.

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