

THE REALITY OF BITTERNESS

INTRODUCTION: So, I have kind of a random—and weird—**confession** to make about my **thought-life** this past week. Want to hear it? Here goes—I’ve spent quite a bit of time this week thinking about **roots!**

Some of you are probably thinking, “You’re right, Pastor—that is kind of **random and weird!**” Others of you might be thinking, “**Why** were you thinking about roots?” I’m glad you asked—even though you didn’t 😊!

Just to clarify, the **roots** I’m talking about is **not the mini-series** based on Alex Haley’s book that aired in 1977—although that has probably been **permanently cancelled**—nor was I thinking about my own roots/ancestry. The roots I spent a lot of time thinking about are **literal roots** found in the ground!

Why was I doing that? Maybe you noticed as you got out of your vehicle and walked to the front door this morning that the landscaping of the two corners on both sides of the door **finally** match—both have the gray, triangle-shaped artificial stones! What you may not, know, though, is the process it took to get to that point!

I’ll spare you most of the **boring** details, but it involves **digging**—then **shaking the dirt off the roots** of the plants and grass that used to occupy that spot. I would then cover up the dirt with tarps to keep the siding somewhat clean in case it rained—and come back the next morning to “root around” in the dirt again... for **more roots!**

And so I **thought about roots!** I thought about trying to **save the roots** of the **rose plants** that I dug up and transplanted on the kitchen end of the building—and I thought about **finding and removing every root** I possibly could from the dirt in the corner where the stones would be placed. I knew I couldn’t **get them all**—but that didn’t stop me from **trying!**

And as I thought about roots—and did **some praying** for some of you—God brought to my mind this phrase from Hebrews 12:15: “lest any **root of bitterness** springing up trouble you...” And so my mind switched from “roots” to **bitterness**. I began to think about how prone we are to bitterness...and what makes us bitter...and how harmful bitterness can be in our lives as individuals and in our church. And while thinking on these things, the Lord impressed upon my heart the need to study this **very important subject**—and share some of these things with you! So there you have the background on why I am doing a series on **bitterness!**

This morning I want to start with: “*The Reality of Bitterness.*”

Please take your Bibles and turn Hebrews 12:14-17 (read). Verse 15 has the phrase I referred to a few minutes ago: “lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you.” In order to see the reality of bitterness, we must first understand **what it is** we are talking about.

1. Explanation of bitterness

So what is bitterness? First, it is... A. An attitude we can possess

We see that here in verse 15. The Greek word it comes from is a **noun**—meaning it is a “thing.” In this case, the “thing” is an **attitude** that someone can possesses—as opposed to **an action** that someone is performing. What is the attitude?

It is an embittered, **resentful** spirit that the bitter person tends to think is **hidden** but is often quite obvious. What does it **look like**? It comes out in the way they **treat the person** they are bitter against—with cynicism...and coldness...and disdain...and harshness...and sometimes even hostility.

It is an attitude that a person **can have**—but obviously shouldn’t!

Joseph’s brothers were bitter against him because of the special treatment their father gave him. The result?

Gen 37:4 “...they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.”

Not only is it an **attitude** we can have, but it is also... B. An action we can perform

Bitterness involves action on **our** part; it involves a **choice**. In fact, you cannot **possess bitterness**—you cannot have it—unless you decide **you want it**. It is not something I can **give you**—like a **book or a Bible**—and it is not something I can **inflict upon you**—like a **bruise or a broken nose**!

Let that sink in—if you are bitter, it is because you **want to be** and **have chosen** to be! And because it **is a choice**, bitterness is something you can **choose to hang onto**—or choose to let go!

Bitterness, then, is a personal, voluntary action that we take that produces within us a resentful spirit.

There is one other “ingredient” (for lack of a better word) and I’m calling it...

C. An “activating event” brought about by a person

What do I mean by an **activating event**? Think of it this way—something **has to happen** before you make a choice to be bitter! It is **not like** “the blahs” where you can wake up feeling kind of down, but not really know why.

You cannot, however, be “randomly” bitter without knowing **why**. A counselor by the name of **Jay Wilson** wrote: “Bitterness **remembers details**. You have had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you have forgotten. But this one took place five years ago, and you **remember every single word**, his intonation and the inflection of every part of his voice. You know **exactly what happened**—which means you are bitter.”

In order for us to **choose** to be bitter, there has to be some kind of **event**—some kind of **problem or situation**—that we choose to **react wrongly to**. But behind the event or problem is a **person**! We **do not** become bitter at our car or cat—we become bitter **at people**! The one exception, of course, is that we can become bitter **at God**! (Yes; I understand God has “personhood,” but He is technically not a person!)

So here’s our **full definition**: Bitterness is a personal, voluntary decision we make to be resentful toward someone—or God—because of what they did (or what we think they did) that displays itself in animosity and hostility. To again quote **Wilson**: “...bitterness is what we feel when others sin against us.”

Is bitterness a reality? It is, isn’t it? In fact, my guess is that a number of you could “relate” to the explanation I just gave of bitterness because you’ve **experienced it** in your own lives.

We know the reality of bitterness from our own experience, but we also know of its reality from the...

2. Exhortation to avoid bitterness

God exhorts us to avoid things that are **real**—not things that don’t exist! Bitterness is real—and can trouble and defile us—and that is why God **warns us against it**!

Notice again v 15: “Looking diligently” is an imperative—a command—that corresponds with the three “lest any’s” that follow. It means “see to it, pay close attention to, inspect closely.” It comes from the Greek word “*episkepeo*” which carries the idea of “over-seeing.”

What were they to be overseeing and watching out for in one another’s lives?

--“lest any fail of the grace of God.” The idea was **not** “watch out for one another so you don’t **lose your salvation**.” Instead, it is this: God saved you by His grace—**live like** you are saved! Don’t fail to have God’s grace impact your life!

Another thing they were to “watch-out” for and “pay close attention to” was **bitterness**

--“lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and therefore many be defiled.”

Just as I tried to get **every** root out of the soil before laying down the weed barrier and stones, God does not want **any** root of bitterness to spring up in us. We are commanded to not let that happen in ourselves—and to warn one another.

This is certainly not the only command to avoid bitterness. Here are a couple of more:

Ephesians 4:31 “Let all **bitterness**, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, **be put away from you**, with all malice.” Get rid of bitterness—don’t let it grow in your **heart**—or your **head**!

It is real—and God says to get rid of it! And because God says to get rid of it, it is obviously something we can—with God’s help—get rid of! We **don’t have to** keep it. Just like we “took it in” in the first place, we can **put it out**!

Here’s another one: **Colossians 3:19** “Husbands, love your wives, and **be not bitter** against them.” Once again, it is a **command**; actually, two of them—**love your wives**; and **be not bitter** against them. God knows us and our tendencies, doesn’t He, men? “I can’t do such and such today because my wife has other plans for me!”

But why **aren’t women commanded** not to be bitter toward their husband? **Can’t** they become bitter toward their husband—just like a husband can become bitter toward his wife? **Of course they can**—and Eph 4:31 proves it because it is to **all believers**. **All of us** are to put away bitterness—not just husbands.

I did have this thought, though—If husbands **really** loved their wives as Christ loved the church, my guess is that very few wives would be bitter toward their husbands!

How do we know bitterness is real? First, because we’ve experienced it. We’ve either been **bitter ourselves**—or had someone **bitter at us**—or both. Second, because of God’s commands to **avoid** it.

Third, because of **examples** of bitterness in the Bible. God records for us several examples of people who were bitter. We are going to look at Naomi today & two more next week—unless the Lord directs otherwise.

3. Example of bitterness in the life of Naomi

Please turn now to the book of Ruth. (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, then Ruth).

I mentioned earlier that bitterness **does not just randomly happen**; there are events that take place in our lives whereby we have an opportunity to **choose to be bitter**—or choose not to be. What happened to Naomi?

A. The events that led to bitterness

Look at Chapter 1, beginning with v 1, and follow along as I read through v 5.

--Talk about hardships and trials! Some of us have been through some **incredibly difficult and painful experiences**, but I doubt they were of the same magnitude as what Naomi went through!

A famine comes, she leaves her home and relatives, and travels to a foreign country with her husband to “wait out” the famine. While there, **her husband dies** and leaves her with her two sons.

As time goes on, though, her **hope of a better** life grows **as her sons grow**, and they are now of the age to marry! She is probably now thinking, ‘They can **take care of me** now—instead of me taking **care of them**!’ Who knows; she probably even begin to think about the possibility of **being a grandmother**!

So just at the point she is probably starting to feel joy and optimism again, **BAM—her two sons die!** She is undoubtedly devastated. In v 6, she decides to return to her own country because she heard the famine is over.

B. The evidence of her bitterness

So how do we know Naomi was bitter? Because **God tells us!** In v 10, we see Naomi’s daughters-in-law insisting they will go back with her; in vs 11-12 she encourages them **not to** because she will not be having any more sons for them to marry!

Now v 13 “Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands?” Naomi says, ‘Even if I got married tonight and had children right away, would you remain single while waiting for them?’ Now look at the **end of v 13** “... nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that **the hand of the Lord is gone out against me.**”

She expresses her bitterness, doesn’t she, and we see that it is **directed toward God!** God had **taken away her husband**...and God had **taken away her sons!** She obviously **did not like** what God had done—**hated** might be a more accurate word—but her sin was **not in disliking** what had happened. Her **sin** was in her **decision to become angry**... and **bitter**...and **resentful** toward God!

We also know that Naomi **remained bitter** on the roughly 50-mile trip back to Bethlehem with Ruth.

How do we know that? Because of **what she said** when she got there!

Look at v 19 “So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?”

The **city did not move**, of course, but the **people** in the city—particularly **the women**—were **stirred!**
V 20 “Call me not Naomi...” Naomi means “pleasant”—but she didn’t want to be called that anymore!
--Instead, she wanted to be called “Mara” which means bitter. **Why** did she want to be called that?
--“For the Almighty hath dealt **very bitterly** with me.”

In v 21 she makes a similar statement “I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty...”

--Then she repeats what she said earlier: ‘Don’t call me “Pleasant” because it is obvious that God is against me!’ “The Lord hath **testified**—witnessed—against me and **afflicted me!**”

Ever feel like this? Ever feel like God is **afflicting you**...and is **against you**? Ever feel like God is **unfair**—and that **you don’t deserve** the “bad things” that are happening to you? If we are honest, my guess is that most of us have felt that way one time or another. So what do we do when we **realize that we are bitter** against God—or another person? We’ll look at **prevention** in the future, but for now let’s consider...

4. Expelling bitterness from our lives

Step #1 A. Call it what it is—sin!

Is it **okay** to **accuse God of being unfair**? It’s not, is it? In fact, by **accusing God** of being unfair, you are in essence saying, “God, **you have done**—or are doing—**wrong!**” In other words, “You, God **are sinful!**” Is that a good thing to do? Obviously not! Why? Because **it’s not true!** The truth is **you are the sinful one**—not God!

God warns us about striving against Him and questioning Him.

Isaiah 45:9 “Woe unto him that **striveth with His Maker!** Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to Him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?”

Romans 9:20 “Nay but, O man, who art thou that **replieth against God?** Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?”

--To strive/quarrel—with God is sin! For you, as the clay, to ask God “What are you doing”—is sin!

--To ask the Creator “Why did you **make me** like this”—or why did you **do this**—is sin!

Recognizing bitterness as a sin is not enough, though—we need to get rid of it!

Step #2 B. Confess it and forsake it. We saw that earlier in Eph 4:31 “Let all **bitterness**, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, **be put away from you...**”

--Don’t **hang onto it and hide it**—it will destroy you!

--And don’t **share it** with others—**get rid of it!**

In the article I’ve referenced a couple of times already, Wilson shared an example of this in his own life. He was working in his bedroom at his desk and his wife was in bed reading. Whatever he was doing was not going well and his wife said something that set him off. He wrote: “[I] let her have it. It was something unchristian. She looked at me in amazement and got up and left the room. I sat there thinking, “She should not have said it. Look what she said. Look, look, look.” I did that for around 10 minutes, maybe longer. I was bitter...”

I sat there for a while and then got up and went over to my side of the bed, got on my knees and said, “Lord, I was the only one at fault. It was my bitterness and my sin. I am confessing it, forsaking it, and please forgive me.”

I got up off my knees and said, “But look what she said.”

I got back on my knees. “God, I’m sorry for what I did. I accept the responsibility. It was my sin and mine only.”

I got up off my knees and said, “God, you and I know who is really at fault.” I knelt back down. I stayed on my knees for 45 minutes until I could get up and not say, “Look what **she said.**”

I do not remember **now** what she said, and I do not remember what I was doing at the desk. I do not remember the details. The only thing I remember now is **getting up**. But I also know that if I had **not taken care of the bitterness** I would know to this day exactly what she had said. That is the nature of bitterness.”

So what would God have us do in light of His Word this morning?

1. Get rid of your bitterness, right? Confess it as a sin—because that is what it is! (1 John 1:9).

--Don't make excuses

--Don't justify why you should hang onto it.

It is wrong—and it is affecting your relationship with that person and with God!

2. Second, have you been forgiven **by God**? No one has “wronged **you**” as much as **you have wronged God!**

Let me say it again, No matter “who” has done “what” to you—you have sinned against God more!

One of the best ways to get rid of bitterness and prevent it in the first place, is to think upon how much we have been forgiven by God (Eph 4:32).

But not everyone is forgiven, are they?

Not everyone will be in heaven, will they?

We need to be born again, Jesus says in John 3:3. If you aren't, you will die in your sins—unforgiven—and spend eternity in hell, separated from God.