

BITTERNESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP  
TO ANGER AND FORGIVENESS

Scripture:

Message 5

INTRO: Let me take a moment to review where we have been so far. In the first message we looked at Simon the Magician in the book of Acts, and Peter's words to him that he perceived he existed in the state of the gall of bitterness and iniquity. We defined bitterness as, "...a state of unresolved anger caused by violated rights or thwarted desires which causes a bitter taste in the soul."

Then we looked at words important to dealing with bitterness or related in some way to it. These were anger; justice; vengeance; forbearance; longsuffering; patience; forgiveness and pride. We considered three words for anger, and saw that anger, as we normally think of it is not wrong. When we let it develop into a grudge, it becomes wrong. When we are wronged, we want justice to be done. God is like that too. That is part of being a person. In such cases we are to place vengeance into the hands of God and forbear with longsuffering and patience. When repentance takes place, forgiveness is to be extended to the one who has done wrong. If we let a grudge develop, and bitterness sets in, pride will keep us locked away in that grudge.

We considered as the primary sources of bitterness, violated rights and thwarted or frustrated desires. The question that now comes is how to deal with bitterness. I fully realize I am not competent to deal with all the kinds of situations that exist. I am sure I only know about a small part of the situations that have brought about bitterness. I have studied this and want to give that which I have found so far. I also think that the areas we will mention this morning will give principles for a whole lot of other cases that will not be mentioned.

I want to deal separately with what to do when the situation is with regard to believers and when it is with regard to unbelievers.

IV. HOW TO OVERCOME BITTERNESS

A. Cases With Believers

1. Law disputes (1 Cor. 6)

There are, I understand, quite frequent business disputes between Christians and I understand that there are regular cases of Christians taking other Christians to the courts of the land because of business disputes. Now the Scriptures deal quite clearly with such cases in 1 Corinthians 6 (read 1-8).

Look now at verse 1 again (read). It is apparent that some of the Corinthian Christians were taking one another to the law courts in financial disputes (see verse 8). Now note in verse 1 as well that the law of the land is referred to as being run by the unrighteous. There are, even in our land, good judges and law people, but by and large, it must be said of all law courts of all time, that they are run by the unrighteous.

On the contrary, Paul suggests that much better judges of disputes would be the saints. That is Christians. The contrast is between going to the unrighteous or the 'holy ones' for that is what saints are.

Now we may say, "But, they are not trained in law!" Notice what Paul says in verses 2-3 (read). What kind of trust does God have in saints? He will set the saints, Christians, to judge the world some day! The Christians will some day judge the entire world! That is all the lost. But that is not all. God will set Christians to judge the angels. This is most likely a reference to the fallen angels.

Now you will surely ask, "When will this happen? When will Christians judge the world, and angels?" It is not our purpose to discuss this but I believe the judgment of the world by Christians may happen at two places. I have no doubt one will be at the end of the tribulation (Matt. 25:31 ->). I think also saints may well judge again at the Great white throne judgment at the end of the millennium. After this, there will be no more judgments. This is also the most likely place for angels to be judged.

So in verses 3b and 4 Paul concludes that since Christians will judge all the lost and the angels, they surely are much more capable of judging things that pertain to this life. And if Christians have the discernment to judge things that concern this life, surely we should go there with disputes rather than to the courts of the land.

Now let me just mention a translation difficulty in verse 4. The KJV says the church is to set those who are least esteemed to judge such cases. the verb 'to set' can be either an indicative or an imperative in the Greek language. The KJV has translated it as an imperative. The NKJV has translated it as an indicative. Both are possible. I think the NKJV is better here. I think what Paul is saying, "...do you set the unbelievers, those who are least esteemed by the church, to judge?"

So in law case disputes with believers, what should one do? It should be brought to the church leaders and they should help set out those who could judge such cases. I think this could well fall into the area of deacon work, though it could be others as well.

But what if the church will not resolve such cases? What if I can't get anything done in the church, and such could well be the case. Note here verse 7 (read). If you cannot get justice from the church, why, rather than going to the unrighteous, do you not allow yourself to be wronged. Why do you not rather allow yourself to be robbed or defrauded? Paul seems to advise this above going to the law. Again, there is not a better verse for such cases than Romans 12:19. Don't avenge yourself. Make room for the wrath of God. He will take care of it. Do not carry a grudge or bitterness. By an active choice, give it over to God. (Henry Reeder, Vhoof.)

How much bitterness is there in the church because of such disputes? I have heard that there is a lot and a lot of it goes to the law of the

land. Here we are instructed on how to handle such cases.

What principle can we glean from Scripture regarding law disputes? When the dispute is with another believer, go to the Church to have the case judged, not the law of the land. When the dispute cannot be settled, it is best to allow yourself to be defrauded.

## 2. Religious disputes (Rom. 14)

There is another area that can cause great bitterness and that is disagreements in what I have called 'religious disputes.' That is things that have to do with what we believe in the spiritual realm. These are such things as diets, days and we could add doctrine and dress as well. The chapter in the Bible that deals with this is Romans 14.

When I teach through this chapter, I call it "The Weak, The Strong, and the Lovely". Let me identify these. First the weak. In 14:1 it says, "Receive one who is weak in the faith..." The 'weak' are identified in verse 2 as those who believe they cannot eat certain foods or they must keep certain days. The 'strong' are those who realize it is not the food that counts, but the principles that govern such things.

Verse 3 then says, "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats. Why? God has received both. Now the one who does not despise the other, though he eats or does not eat, becomes what I have called 'the lovely'.

With regard to days, consider verses 5-6. So, in our community, when we the second and third holiday of Christmas or Easter or Pentecost come, what is the best thing to do? Well, according to this passage, the weak believe the day must be kept. The strong realize they are free to work. But to work, or do certain activities may cause harm to our witness, and so we keep the day.

What about doctrine? Great bitterness can come from doctrinal disagreements. Over the years I have struggled with this. I have found helpful to view doctrine in three categories: essential doctrine; secondary doctrine; and various lesser doctrines. Essential doctrines are those that are essential to Christianity. The deity of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. Justification by grace through faith alone etc.. These are doctrines worth dying for.

There are secondary doctrines. We have things like the head covering; conditional verses unconditional eternal security; foot-washing; speaking in tongues etc.. Believers differ on these but they do not determine if one is truly a Christian or not. I call them secondary doctrines, though by secondary I do not mean unimportant. But these doctrines are not worth losing friends over. Graciously allow others to believe what they believe, though you may discuss such things with them. But then, do not lightly discard your convictions just because others differ with you. Here, Romans 14 is the key chapter.

Thirdly, there are many and various lesser teachings that are of such a nature that people within the same denomination may disagree over. So, top level doctrine determines if I am a Christian. Secondary doctrines determine what denomination I fit into. Third level doctrines are things which people in the same denomination may disagree over. These things can cause great bitterness, but should not do so.

What about dress? Well, I do not want to spend much time here other than to say that I believe the Bible sets out principles, rather than express guidelines for dress. For example, modesty is a principle that should govern all dress. And Christians can differ on what they believe is modest. Our level of spirituality will determine what we consider modest and so on.

What principles can we learn from Scriptures regarding such things as diets and days? If we

have a conscience about these things, we must not violate our conscience. If we are free from such scruples, then we must seek not to make others stumble who do not yet have this freedom. We need to learn to love our Christian brother or sister in these situations.

### 3. Sinned against (Matt. 18)

What about when a believer sins against me, or they wrong me in some way? Do I practice forbearance and patience? Do I suffer wrong? Do I say anything or do I leave it? It is very hard to say when I must practice forbearance and when I must deal with a certain issue. There are many lesser issues, if we can forbear and give the other person room to grow, that is the best. But if these are obviously things that must be dealt with or things that will cause me to grow bitter, now they must be dealt with.

When they must be dealt with, Matthew 18:15-17, gives us the steps to dealing with such matters. Possibly one of the things that would help me determine if this matter must be dealt with is if it is of such a nature that I would see excommunication in order if the person does not deal with it.

Verse 15 gives the first step (read). I think most things can be solved here. But if they cannot, verse 16 gives the second step (read). Hopefully the matter can be taken care of here. But if not, then it is to go to the third and final step (read 17). Failure to deal with the matter at this point calls for excommunication.

Now let me just give one word of explanation here regarding treating the person like a heathen or a tax collector. It is commonly held in our day that we should treat them like unbelievers and make every effort to win them back to the Lord. I believe it means that they should be shunned, as has been the practice in Mennonite circles since early times. How did the Jews treat heathen and tax collectors? They shunned them.

There are four cases of excommunication given in the NT. This is the first. The second is found in 1 Corinthians 5. This is the case of gross immorality. Here we are told to deliver such a person to Satan (v. 5). He is to be 'purged out' (v. 7). He is not to be companied with (v. 9). Then in verse 11, we are told to not even eat with such a person (read). I think that is what is meant by treating the person like a heathen and a tax collector.

Another case is where a person becomes theologically perverted. He is to be admonished twice and then rejected (Titus 3:10). I believe this speaks of the same treatment. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 Paul teaches how to deal with people who call themselves Christians, and they are lazy and do not provide for their families. In 3:6 he instructs to withdraw from such Christians. Then in verse 14 he instructs to not keep company with such a person. Again, that describes the actions to be taken against those who call themselves Christians and live wrong. All of this indicates that treating someone as a heathen and a tax collector, means we shun such people.

So what are the principles that govern what I should do when I am wronged by another Christian? First, I need to go see this person, tell them the issue, and try to resolve it. If I cannot resolve it, I need to take one or two with me, and try again. Those whom I take with me are there to verify what has taken place. If it still cannot be resolved, then it is to go to the church. If the church cannot solve the problem, the person is to be excommunicated.

How do I know if the matter is serious enough to deal with? I do not know, other than if it will cause bitterness, it should be dealt with.

## B. Cases With Unbelievers

What do I do when I am wronged by an unbeliever? It may well depend on the situation. For example, in

school, I may go to the principal and tell him. But I should not insist on my rights.

What about in business? What if I am wronged in business? Well, if Paul's advice about being wronged in law situations with believers, to allow oneself to be defrauded, much more so should we allow ourselves to be defrauded by unbelievers. Of course, we should seek to avoid getting ourselves into situations where we can be abused in this way. But if it happens, then I think we should allow ourselves to be defrauded. Again, we need to recognize that God works all things for good to those who love Him, and that we can trust Him in such situations as well.

Let me read several Scriptures here: Rom. 12:17-21; Matthew 5:38-48. I have given this thought in the past. I think that in such situations, especially if the one who has been wronged is in need of that money or whatever else it may be, the church should help.

For those of you who have heard this story before, forgive me. It is worth repeating. In the town where I grew up there was an 'old order' Mennonite family that moved in from the US. The man was a carpenter and he did some work for a business man in town. If I remember right, the business man was not happy with the work and would not pay him anything for a rather large job. My dad heard about that and said, "Well, Henry, you aren't just going to let him get away with that are you?" And this man said, "Oh Ben, if he can live with it, I can live without it." I have never forgotten that statement. Nor was there the least bit of bitterness in him. The Christian far outlived the business man, but now they have both gone to their 'inheritance'.

Let me read for you the verse that follows the one in Romans that I have quoted so much in these messages: "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,'" says the Lord. Therefore If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head."



What is the principle? Do not avenge yourself. Give it into the hands of God, and continue to treat him with love.

### C. Cases With God

What do I do if I am angry or bitter because of things that have happened in my life and they are not people related? For example, my crop got hailed out; I cut off my hand or someone close to me passed away etc... If this is the case, then we are angry at God. In such cases we need to realize this bitterness is sin, and we need to confess to Him and ask His forgiveness. We all know that the Bible says, "All things work together for good to those who love God." But to accept that as a truth that applies to my life is another story. Maybe there are some things for which you cannot thank God. You cannot accept that as good. Today is another opportunity to think that over and consider who God truly is.

Let me add something here though. I think among our Mennonites I see a very high degree of acknowledging God in tragic situations. It is a very admirable aspect among our people. But we have almost become fatalistic through that admirable practice. Let me explain what I mean by being fatalistic.

A very, very tragic situation happened in our community. And one of the people very closely related to the situation said something like this, "Wie kjen'n nich feston'n wooruum sick dinga han must sooruum nam'n." "We cannot understand why things had to had to happen this way." But things did not have to happen that way. It was because of sinful living that things happened that way.

Let me use an illustration, though this is not one that happened. Some young people have partied almost all night and they are going home at 120 mph with a driver who is in a drunken stupor. The vehicle collides with a tractor and all the young people are killed. When we say in such a case, "We cannot understand why things had to happen this way" then I view that as fatalistic. We are saying this had to happen, but the facts are it did not have to happen. Sin has its consequences.

But what if I am the parent of one of those young people? I may well want to become bitter about the situation or even about the driver, or the ones who initiated the party. What about a parent like this? Fatalism may keep me from becoming bitter, but it is not correct. How do I stay away from bitterness? Well, if I am a believer, I need to trust God, that all things work together for good to those who love Him.

But let us say I am angry at myself for not putting more effort into training my children. I have let them do their own thing and have not put effort into training them. What do I do? Forgive myself? Well, if I have failed my child, I am guilty before God and need to find forgiveness with Him for my failure. So I need to repent before God and accept His forgiveness

CONCL: Well, let us conclude these messages on bitterness. Let me give the definition of bitterness again that I have been using: It is a state of unresolved anger caused by violated rights or thwarted desires which causes a bitter taste in the soul. Paul says in Ephesians 4:31, "Let all bitterness be put away from you."

How do we put it away? Well, first we must recognize that we are bitter. Then we must acknowledge our wrong, and from there seek to overcome it. It is also crucial that we recognize those things that will lead us into bitterness and keep clear of those.

Let me say here as well that when we deal with these kinds of issues, we feel that so much of the Christian life is negative. But there are many good places, even in a life filled with difficulties. John Bunyan wrote the book 'Pilgrim's Progress' while he was in prison. In this book he pictures a man by name of Pilgrim traveling the narrow and treacherous path described by Jesus in Matthew 7:13-14. And Pilgrim, on his journey to the celestial city, faced many trials and difficulties. But on this road there were pleasant places where he rejoiced in the Lord. Let us do the same, "...for now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed."

