

Beware of Bitterness

Ephesians

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Bible Text: Ephesians 4:31-32
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If you would, please, turn to the book of Ephesians chapter four. Ephesians chapter four and we will read beginning with the 17th verse down to verse 32.

Paul writes:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 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.¹

Let's pray and ask God's blessing on our time in his Word this morning.

¹ Ephesians 4:17-32.

Lord, we are very much aware of what we can do on our own in this hour. We can do nothing. And so, Lord, we look to you for your blessing. Help me today to teach your Word. Bring to my mind those things that you have been dealing with my mind and heart about, the things you have been teaching me. Be at work in our hearts this morning, Father, as we listen. Grant your light. Lord we all know what it is when your Word breaks forth upon our hearts and your light shines in such a way that we grasp things that we have not grasped before and we are dealt with in a way that only you, the true and living God can deal with a heart. And we ask you for that this day this morning and this day we have to worship you. Lord, I pray for your people. I pray for my brothers and sisters that the result of being exposed to your Word today would be, Lord, that we would be edified, built up, cleansed, washed, corrected, broken, brought to a fresh place of surrender before you. Lord, I also pray again for the lost among us and I ask for new birth to be granted, that there would be souls that today would enter into your kingdom and your family through faith in Jesus. We ask for this today in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today I want to talk to you about a very dangerous, deadly influence that threatens believers. It threatens individual lives. It threatens families. It threatens churches. It threatens relationships. It is a destroyer. It destroys people. It destroys relationships. If it were to be compared to a disease, we would have to compare it to the worst kind, maybe the worst kind of cancer or a the worst kind of a deadly virus. It would be known as a silent killer because it often lodges itself in a believer's life and its symptoms don't begin to fully show up until it is already metastasized and by the time that its symptoms surface, the patient is already in a dangerous critical condition.

It is a disease that lowers your immune system, so to speak, so that if this sin is present in your life what it does is it opens the door to all kinds of other sins, all kinds of other diseases begin to break out in a person's life where this disease has lodged itself.

What I am talking about today from God's Word is the powerful sin called bitterness. Notice again what verse 31 says.

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”²

Maybe already you have a sense of what I mean when I say it is sort of a silent killer, because maybe when you heard me begin and talk about some influence that could destroy us this way, maybe the last thing on your mind would have been something like bitterness.

I mean, I thought he was going to talk about some really big sin, right? I mean, something really deadly, something really dangerous.

Well, I hope that by the end of this day when we look at God's Word together, I hope you will be convinced that is exactly what bitterness is. It is a really big deal. It is deadly. It is deadly.

² Ephesians 4:31.

Not only does our text warn us about it, but so do a number of other texts.

For example, Hebrews 12:15 says, “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.”³

Deuteronomy 29:18, which is what Hebrews 12:15 is referring to says,

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, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’ This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike.”⁴

Oh, this is serious business. And today I want us to think about it together.

Now, I was looking this week at sharing this with you and I was faced, again, with a decision that we have sometimes, one really long sermon or two kind of long sermons, probably. All right? So I decided on two kind of long sermons, just kidding. Hopefully they won’t be too long. But we are going to divide this into two parts.

This morning we are going to talk about diagnosing this issue. We are going to talk about what bitterness looks like, how the Bible defines it, how we could describe it. And so we are going to go before the great physician, we are going to go before the one who knows our hearts and our souls better than we know ourselves and we are going to ask the Lord to show us if there is any bitterness in our lives. And so this morning we are going to focus on recognizing bitterness. And then tonight we are going to come back and we are going to talk about how to be free from it, how to deal with the bitterness that may be in our lives, how to put it away as we are told to do in verse 31.

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”⁵

And the question is: How do you do that? How do you put it away? We will talk about that tonight. We will concentrate on that this evening.

But this morning we want the Lord to show us that it is in our lives. If we are to put it all away, then we need to recognize if it is present.

So how does the Bible define bitterness? How could we describe it this morning?

³ Hebrews 12:15.

⁴ Deuteronomy 29:18-19.

⁵ Ephesians 4:31.

And here is the first thing I want to share with you. Bitterness is a form of anger. What is bitterness? It is anger. Notice something in verse 31. Notice that all of these things have to do with anger. Right?

He says, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”⁶

Now before we think about bitterness, just notice the other words that are in that verse. The word wrath is the word θυμος (thoo-mos’). It speaks of the kind of anger that boils up. Boiling up is what the word means, passion, heat. It is true to say that the next word I am going to talk about in just a moment, that these two words for anger are used at times interchangeably, synonymously, but it is also true to say that in some settings they are distinguished from one another. And if there is to be a distinction, this first word, the word translated here “wrath” has to do with an explosive kind of anger, something that sort of breaks out, boils up, boils over. The Stoics saw this as angry outbursts, a bad temper and it just sort of blows up. That is what this word will refer to.

The word “anger” there is the word οργη (or-gay’) and this word was seen, again, when it is distinguished from the other, it is seen as more settled brooding kind of hostility. It is the anger that just remains in your life, sort of below the surface. It is just always there. I wonder if there is someone here today that if we were to ask your family or ask your close friends they would just have to say about you, “He is just an angry person. I mean, there is just always some kind of anger there.”

So you have an explosive kind of anger. It doesn’t always show up, but when it does, it blows up. And then you have this sort of brooding constant attitude present in a life.

What is funny is when you move to the next two words these two words seem to mirror those first two expressions. How does this get expressed? How does this anger get expressed? Well the next word “clamor” is a word that refers to outcry, shouting, angry yelling. If someone has an explosive temper, how does it often manifest itself? It manifests itself through the mouth and it manifests itself through yelling.

But there is another kind of way to express your anger and that is slander. The word there means to blaspheme. So this anger in a person’s life can be expressed in a more silent kind of speech. You just seek to destroy the object of your anger with your words in a more private kind of way.

So you can yell at someone or you can slander someone. But both would be to express your anger toward them. I mean, after all, what kind of person would you want to destroy with your words? Someone you are angry with.

⁶ Ibid.

And then notice that all of this is wrapped up at the end of the verse with this word “malice.”

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”⁷

And that word speaks of wickedness. And so God is wanting us to see, the Holy Spirit is wanting us to see that all of this anger, if we are going to see it accurately, if we are going to see it for what it is, it is all wickedness, something greatly displeasing to the Lord.

We ought not to ever take our anger lightly. I wonder if there is someone who, you know, you sort of excuse your temper and you say, “Well, that is just me. Everyone knows me. I explode all over everyone, but then I am over it quickly.”

Well, God says it is wickedness. It is sin.

So it is in the midst of this list, you see, that this word “bitterness” is given to us. πικρία (pik-ree’-ah) is the word. And in this context it becomes clear. It is a kind of anger. That is what it is.

So what would set bitterness apart from these other words? What is the distinctive characteristic of this kind of anger?

Andrew Lincoln commenting on this particular Greek word for bitterness wrote this. He says, “It is a word which indicates the hard heartedness that harbors resentment about the past.”

This is an anger that is present in our life and it is associated itself with something in our past.

I want us to think about that. I want us to delve more deeply into that. Let us think about what bitterness is.

A few things we can say about it. First of all it comes into our life from a perceived wrong suffered. I say perceived wrong because there are people who are bitter about things and they actually see the situation entirely in a wrong light. In fact, you have seen it. I have seen it. There have been people who ultimately repent of their bitterness and after they have repented, maybe even they have been saved, they look back at what they were so angry about and they say, “You know what? I just saw that situation entirely wrong. I was just wrong.”

So it doesn’t even have to be something legitimate for you to be bitter. It could be something imagined, an imagined slight, an imagined injustice.

⁷ Ibid.

But it can also be about something that is legitimate, that really did happen to you. I mean, what you feel like was wrong, was really wrong. And you are angry about it.

But regardless whether it was real or imagined, this is what happens. Bitterness takes root when we feel that we have been mistreated so that there is a sense of injustice that is present in our life.

Bitterness almost always develops where we had an expectation that was different from what we actually experienced. I expected this, but this is what I have. This is what I expected when I took this job, but this is what I am actually having to live with and I am angry about it. This is what I expected when I married you, but this is who you have actually turned out to be and now I am angry about it. This is what I expected when you said you were my friend, but this is the way you have treated me and now I am angry about it. This is what I expected my life would be like by the time that I was 40 years old, but now this is what my life is actually like and I am frustrated with it. And it is not fair, you see? It is not right. I deserve better.

And, folks, you can mark this down. Tied up with this thing called bitterness is pride. I deserve better than this. So there is a sense of injustice that is present where there is bitterness. At the same time we can say there may be a sense of frustration. I mean, you have gone beyond what is reasonable with me.

You know, what happen is that the person who has these bitter feelings, they sort of drew a line in the sand in their mind and it... the standard can be different for different people. If we are not going by the Word of God, if we are not dealing with anger and wrongs have been done to us by Scripture, then what we are left with is our own standard. And so people have different standards. Some people there is a very quick line that they draw. Other people, they imagine themselves to be longsuffering. So their line in the sand is somewhere further out here. But ultimately what happens is the same. You know, I put up with this for a while. I tried to do the right thing for a while. I tried to keep a right attitude for a while, but you have just gone too far. You have exhausted my patience. And so when that line has been crossed, then the bitterness begins to set in.

How long? How long do I have to put up with this? How many times does this have to happen?

And, by the way, if you don't believe—and I trust you do believe. We all know ourselves. We all know our own attitudes, but if you don't believe this is just a part of the mindset of sinful humanity, then just notice in your Bible how many times that kind of sentiment is expressed. How long? How many times?

Do you remember Peter's question for the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:21?

“Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’”⁸

He had a generous standard, didn't he? Seven times?

What is the biblical answer to that? Is it seven? How did the Lord Jesus answer that question?

Seventy times seven. What does that mean? It is inexhaustible. Now there is a way to process that. There is a way to see all of this in its proper proportion and place, but nonetheless, just recognize this is what men do. How many times do I have to put up with this?

So the first thing we can say about this bitterness as we begin to delve into and recognize it is wherever it is happening in a life, it has come to be, because we have perceived that we have been wronged and we are angry about it.

There is a second thing, though, I want you to recognize with me about bitterness and that is ultimately if we ask, where is this anger being expressed, this is what we miss. We don't see this. But the second thing I want you to recognize is the anger of bitterness is ultimately always godward. You think you are angry with that person. You think you are angry with that situation. You think you are angry with your circumstances, but I say to you today on the authority of Scripture, that you are actually directing your anger toward God.

Why do I say that? Because if you are bitter, if you are angry, what you cannot be recognizing is that God is sovereign and he is to be believed. He is to be trusted with your life. Do you see your life as just a series of random events? I mean, do you think things are just happening to you? Do you find yourself in your current situation by accident? Or is there a sovereign God in this universe above the universe, transcends the universe, created the universe? Is God in control? And does he have a plan for your life? And is his plan for your life on course? Is there a reason to all of this that is going on in your life. Is there some kind of organization to it?

Now I say to you that people who are bitter are people who don't believe God. They don't trust God with their lives. They don't recognize in a joyful believing way that God is sovereign over their affairs and he has a reason for what is happening and he is to be believed and obeyed in the face of what is happening.

How do I say that? Well, because there are some notable figures in the Bible who from every human point of view should have been bitter, but they were not bitter. And in every case when you hear their testimony and you look at their lives and you recognize why they were not bitter, in every case it is because they believed that God had a purpose for what they were facing and they trusted God in their circumstances.

⁸ Matthew 18:21.

For example, would you say that Job, from a human point of view, would have been someone tempted to be bitter? What do you think? Did he have some difficult circumstances, could he have complained about them? Do you think he could have been bitter at his wife? I mean, after they have lost their children and lost his wealth and lost his health and she was just a real encouraging soul, wasn't she? I mean just a breath of fresh air, sunshine.

“Why don't you just... why do you hold fast to your integrity? Why don't you just curse God and die?”

That is what you need to hear.

Job chapter two verse seven.

So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.⁹

Do you hear what he said? When good things were happening for us we gave glory to God. when the things that were pleasurable and we viewed as beneficial, when these things were happening, we gave glory to God. Shall we not receive from the same hand, from the same God these things that are difficult?

How about Joseph? Would you say that Joseph was a candidate for bitterness? Thrown into a pit by his brothers, sold into slavery by his brothers, ends up in Egypt. Faithfully serving Potiphar, falsely accused, ends up in prison. Then from the pit to the pinnacle, second highest place of leadership in the nation. I mean, God has just been showing himself marvelously sovereign in this man's life.

And then his brothers show back up. Now if you don't think that they knew that he was a candidate for bitterness, just listen to their words and their attitudes when they meet with him again and recognize this is Joseph.

Genesis chapter 50. Look at verse 15 if you want to turn there. In fact, let's turn there so you can see it.

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.” So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died, ‘Say to Joseph, Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’ And now,

⁹ Job 2:7-10.

please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me.”¹⁰

You see, this is the wonderful thing about being free from bitterness. It does not require that you be naïve. It does not require that you call wrong right. It is not required that you deny that wrongs have been done. It just requires a different, supernatural, Holy Spirit taught response to what you have been through.

Joseph doesn’t deny that they have done him evil.

Verse 20.

“As for you, you meant evil against me.”¹¹

But notice his view of God.

“...but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.”¹²

I mean, he sees the sovereign hand of God in all of this. He sees the providences of God at work so that he is able to be free from bitterness because his life has been entrusted to the Lord.

There was a reason for what you did to me. There was a reason that you sold me into slavery. There is a reason I have been separated from my family all these years. There is a reason for it all and it was God’s reason that has been worked out here.

You see, people become bitter when they don’t have this view. In fact, we can say this. Bitterness is the fruit of unbelief. Bitterness is the fruit of not trusting the Lord with your life.

So, first of all, it comes when we think we have been done wrong. Second, it comes when we don’t trust the Lord’s sovereign purposes for our life. We don’t see a purpose for what we are going through. We begin to view our life as just a series of random events with God not having any control or purpose that is directing them.

The third thing we can say about this bitterness, it is anger that has been allowed to remain.

¹⁰ Genesis 50:15-20.

¹¹ Genesis 50:20.

¹² Ibid.

You go back to Andrew Lincoln's definition. He talks about a hard heartedness that is present because we have harbored resentment. We have harbored it. We have held on to it. We have kept it. Bitterness is about the past. You see, it is living in the past in the sense of anger so that something that is happening back here and I won't let go of it. I won't forgive it, not really. There are lots of bitter people who say they are forgiven, by they haven't. The proof that they haven't is that they are bitter. Bitterness happens when we don't deal with anger biblically, when we nurse what has been done to us. We fuel it. We remember it. We file it away. We think about it often. We resurrect it from the dead. In fact, many times people are bitter about something that has already been confessed by the person they are angry toward. It has already been confessed. They have already asked you for forgiveness, but you won't let it go.

This is one reason why we are warned. In fact, in our very text we are warned not to allow anger to remain in our lives. Do you see it in our text? Look back to verse 25.

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”¹³

And then what does he say?

“Be angry.” There is a legitimate kind of anger. “...and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”¹⁴

I mean, settle your accounts daily and really settle them. Don't let this thing last overnight. Deal with your anger swiftly. Deal with your anger biblically. Keep anger in its proper place because notice verse 27. Who is prowling around ready to do some work with your anger?

Verse 27.

“And give no opportunity to the devil.”¹⁵

Do you know how is a master at taking anger and using it for his purposes? Satan.

So I feel like I have been done wrong, but ultimately if I could just recognize it, my anger is towards the Lord because, after all, who is in control of my life?

So I don't believe him. I don't believe that he has a good purpose for me. I don't believe that he really loves me. I don't believe there is a good purpose for what I am going through or have gone through. And the result of that is I am not dealing with my anger biblically. I am not dealing with it daily. I am not truly forgiving and putting things in their proper place. I am holding on to it and nursing it and fueling it, harboring

¹³ Ephesians 4:25.

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:26.

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:27.

resentment, which gets to the fourth thing we can say about it is we recognize it. It is an anger that is settled.

Bitterness is a hard heartedness. Bitterness makes up its mind toward its object. We think now we see it clearly. We think now we have judged it correctly. I know who you are and my view of you is not going to change so that there is no hope for its object, not really. And every point of view we have toward the person we are angry at or the situation we are angry about, every thing we see is now colored dark by our anger.

You can have two people doing the very same thing or saying the very same thing or acting the very same way, but if we are angry toward this person we see it one way and if we are friendly toward this person, we see it another way. The difference is not in the words or behavior or even the motives in some cases. The difference is in our view of those people so that now there is just nothing positive I am willing to see about the person that I have been angry with. No hope for their repentance, no hope for their changing, no real hope for reconciliation. In fact, this is the kind of anger that is really murderous. When you are bitter toward a person you wouldn't mind if they were not on the face of the earth.

This is what bitterness is, a hard hearted resentment because of something that has happened in your past.

Now here is a second thing I want to point out. The first thing is what is it. What is bitterness? This is bitterness. The second thing I want to point out about this sin is that this is what characterizes lost humanity. According to Scripture, this is what characterizes lost people. They are bitter.

It is used, this same Greek word, πικρία (pik-ree'-ah) is used to describe natural humanity, Romans chapter three verse 12. The Bible, describing lost humanity says this.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”
“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”¹⁶

This is lost society. This is people who don't know Jesus. They open their mouth and bitterness comes out.

The same word is used to warn Simon in Acts chapter eight that he was giving evidence that he was lost. I want you to look to Acts chapter eight with me real quickly, the book of Acts chapter eight. Look at verse 18. Let's back up to verse 14, put it in its context.

¹⁶ Romans 3:12-14.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."¹⁷

If you ask what Peter means when he says that he sees in this man the gall of bitterness, I think what he means is he sees the fruit of an unsatisfied life. This is the life in bondage to sin. It is the dissatisfied life. What characterizes all of lost humanity? What is constantly coming out of the mouths of lost people? Not only the anger and the hatred that is bitterness, but also the dissatisfaction, the absolute unbelief concerning the good and true God of the Bible and his control over our lives and this plan for our lives. This is constantly being expressed through the mouths of human beings. I am not satisfied. And I deserve better. And I want what you have. And I want to be able to possess what you possess. And I want to be able to enjoy what you enjoy. This constant life of dissatisfaction, it is a bitter life. It is the fruit of unbelief. Never satisfied, never truly joyful, never truly how you want it to be.

That is really what bitterness is about. Again, when we are angry even with a person or a situation, it is because it is not what we expected. It is not what I want. It is not what makes me satisfied.

This same word is used in Hebrews 12. Look over there. Hebrews chapter 12 to warn about apostasy.

Hebrews 12. Notice this exhortation concerning believers who are in danger of apostatizing, walking away from the Lord. Look at verse 12.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 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.¹⁸

¹⁷ Acts 8:14-23.

¹⁸ Hebrews 12:12-14.

I told you earlier that this is really referring back to Deuteronomy 29 and he is warning there of an individual or a tribe or a clan that stops believing the words of God in the stubbornness of their heart. They believe that they won't suffer any trouble even though they don't believe the Lord. In other words, they walk away from the true and living God because they are not satisfied with what this life represents, this life of serving Yahweh. It doesn't satisfy them.

And this word is used here in Hebrews 12 to warn against apostasy which gets to another thought and that is this sin of bitterness actually opens the door to apostasy.

What is bitterness? It is man's attempt to deal with his anger apart from God. When you become bitter it is because you are trying to deal with your anger in a way that is apart from God, that doesn't agree with his Word, that doesn't reflect his perspective. It is an under the sun response to something you have gone through. In fact, there are people who will even attempt to remake God so that they can hold on to their bitterness.

Well, I just really think the Lord understands this. Well, I just think the Lord will really understand the way I backed or the behavior that I have engaged in or the way that I have talked to you or the way I have responded to this.

Never mind that his word in no way affirms your actions, in no way affirms your thinking, in no way affirms your words, in no way affirms your attitudes, but you will even remake God, you see, in order to hold on to your anger, because to respond to your anger in a way that would please the Lord wouldn't satisfy you.

There is nothing supernatural about bitterness. There is nothing of the Holy Spirit's work that is expressed in bitterness. There is nothing that accords with the gospel that is present in bitterness. There is nothing Christ like about being bitter.

When you can see the Lord Jesus hanging on a cross and saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,"¹⁹ how can you explain, excuse and justify your anger? It opens the door to a departure from God when we allow anger to remain in our life in a way like this. And it not only opens the door to unfaithfulness to God, it opens the door to unfaithfulness in every realm in our life. It opens the door to unfaithfulness in marriage.

It would be interesting to study how many marriages where they have broken up, began with one spouse being angry toward the other holding on to some past hurt, holding on to something done to them and they nurse it and they feed it and they fuel it and they won't let go of it and as a result of that, over time their heart becomes more and more hardened until finally they just are unfaithful to the covenant they have entered into.

It opens the door to unfaithfulness in the moral realm. Someone says to themselves, "Here I am. I have sought to live a pure life. I have sought do the right thing. I have sought to obey the Scriptures. And look at how this has worked out."

¹⁹ Luke 23:34.

And if you think that no one ever thinks that way, just read Psalm 73 where the psalmist says, “I thought that I kept my heart pure in vain.”

It opens the door to unfaithfulness in all relationships. When you hold on to anger, you cannot be a faithful brother or sister to the person you are angry toward. You cannot be a faithful friend to the person you are angry toward. You can't. So that we see that a person who is habitually angry is someone who doesn't give evidence of the presence of the new nature, someone who doesn't give evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit, someone who doesn't give evidence that they understand God's grace at all.

Bitterness characterizes lost people.

Look back at our text if you are not there, Ephesians four and you will note. Isn't it interesting that this is put to us in this particular context? Remember the larger context. Go back to verse 17 and listen to what he is saying.

“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you [believer] must no longer walk as the Gentiles do,²⁰ the unconverted. They, the unconverted, you see, are darkened in their understanding. They are alienated. They don't have the life of... they are alienated from the life. They don't have the life of God. There is this inborn ignorance operating in them. There is a hardness of heart operating in them.

They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!²¹

Is it?

...assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.²²

Now you have the capacity to think in step with Christ, to think in step with the Spirit, to think in step with the Scriptures. You are to put on this new you. Who has been “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”²³

Now do we apply all of that? Verse 25. Therefore, you see. What do you do? You put away falsehood. You stop lying. You put away stealing. You stop stealing. You put

²⁰ Ephesians 4:17.

²¹ Ephesians 4:19-20.

²² Ephesians 4:21-23.

²³ Ephesians 4:24.

away corrupt talk. You stop grieving the Spirit of God “by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”²⁴

And here is what else you do, verse 31. You put away all bitterness and all your outbursts of anger and all your seething anger and all your angry yelling and all your slanderous speech and every thing else that is wicked. You put it off.

Now we are going to stop there this morning.

Let me finish by asking us some questions. First of all, who here today has bitterness? Who has bitterness? Who here today has an anger in your life related to something that has been done to you in your past? Or who is frustrated and angry with your current circumstances? I might even ask it a different way because that question is intended for believers. Let me just ask you this. Are you just a bitter person? Are you just a bitter, angry person as a rule? Because that, friend, is the mark of someone who is not converted at all, who has never met Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Second, I would ask you this. Do you realize the dangerous nature of your anger?

Look, it may be at the stage right now that no one else can see it. No one else notices it. In fact, it may be that most of the time you deal with it pretty well. But you haven't dealt with it biblically. You haven't dealt with it in light of the gospel. And so it just sits there. And you think it is not really a bit deal.

I want to tell you something. Listen. If you don't deal with that bitterness, it will wreak havoc in your life in the future. It will. Do you understand this is a deadly influence?

Third, I would ask you this. Are you already seeing the effects of it? Is it already causing a problem in your marriage? Is it already causing a problem with your children? Is it already causing a problem in a friendship? Is it already getting in the way of your worship?

Fourth, have you been excusing it, justifying it? You deserve to be angry because of what has been done to you, when God says, the God of the Bible, you see, the true God says it is wicked.

Now listen. Either you will have to get rid of your wickedness or you will have to get rid of that God in your thinking. You will either make a god of your own who will agree with you that it is all right for you to be angry, or you will have to take your anger to the foot of the cross of Jesus and realize it is such a sin that he had to die for. And you will put it away.

This gets to my last question. Will you deal with this as sin today? Will you deal with your bitterness as a sin to be confessed, to be repented of, to be rid of by God's help?

²⁴ Ephesians 4:30.

And tonight we are going to come back. We are going to talk about how to be free from it.

Let's bow together for prayer.

Father in heaven, we thank you that your Word is the truth. And in a world full of deception and the unsure shifting, lying ground of human wisdom that is all around us, we thank you that we can set our feet on the solid ground of your Word. Lord, no matter what our emotions say, no matter what others would say to us, no matter what our excuses would try to convince us of, I pray that wherever there is bitterness in our lives this day we would recognize it for the deadly influence that it is and the great wickedness that is and we would turn from it with your help, right now. We thank you for our Savior. We thank you that he died to bring us the forgiveness of all of our sins. We thank you that you are sovereign so that we can see with Job and we can see with Joseph that our live is not a series of random events. There is a purpose. There is a plan and, God, you are trustworthy. I pray that we would trust you all over again, that we would lay our lives down before you right now and just trust you. We thank you for this today in the name of our Savior and King the Lord Jesus. Amen.