

# Freedom From Bitterness

*Ephesians*

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**Bible Text:** Ephesians 4:31-32

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If you would please turn to Ephesians chapter four. We return to the passage we were looking at this morning. I want us to read again beginning with verse 17 down to the end of the section. Ephesians four verse 17.

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.<sup>1</sup>

Let's go to our God together in prayer and ask his blessing.

*Father in heaven, we ask now that you would teach us, that you would deal with our hearts, that your Holy Spirit would take this Word that he authored through the apostle*

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:17-32.

*Paul and give us understanding of it and apply it to us in such a way that our lives are changed. We thank you that you are sanctifying us, your people. We thank you, Lord, that you are conforming us to the image of our Savior. Lord, our Savior tells us of this Word that it is truth and that you are sanctifying us in the truth, with the truth. We thank you for this. Lord, I pray that you would expose to us those things that are at work in our lives that are destructive toward us that we may not even be aware of, sins that we are blinded to, that we might see those things and turn from them and confess of them and repent of them. And, Lord, I pray for any brother or sister who is aware of sin, but they have not yet dealt with it obediently. I pray that even this night you would break their heart over that and bring them to a place of fresh surrender. And, Lord, I also pray for anyone in our midst who doesn't know you, Lord, and doesn't belong to your family. I pray for their salvation. We love you. We thank you that you have transformed us, that you have made us, Lord, your people. And we ask you to do your work now in the lives of your people, in the life of your church tonight through your Word. We ask you for this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

This morning we began looking at this deadly influence, this destructive sin called bitterness and we focused this morning on identifying, defining it, being able to recognize it when it is in our lives. We said a couple of key things about it. First of all we said that bitterness is anger. Bitterness is a form of anger. It is a hard hearted resentment that we have held on to. We have harbored it because of something that has gone on in our past. We feel like that in some way we have been mistreated. We feel like there is some kind of injustice that is done. It may be something legitimate, something that really was done to us. It may be something that we are just looking at the wrong way, an imagined sleight, an imagined wrong. But regardless of whether it is legitimate or not, what is true, where there is bitterness is that we feel like we have been wronged and we hold on to it and we nurse it and we feed it and the result of that is that over time our heart becomes hard and we have this resentment that is settled in our perspectives.

The second thing we noted about bitterness is that it characterizes lost people. This is, in fact, this work, πικρία (pik-ree'-ah) is used to describe lost humanity in Romans chapter three.

“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”<sup>2</sup>

This is what comes out of the human soul, estranged from God, apart from Christ is this sense that we deserve better. This dissatisfaction that expresses a viewpoint that says, “I deserve better. Life is not like I want it to be.” And that is really what this anger called bitterness is all about. Either we are displeased with a person or we are displeased with our circumstances, but we feel like we deserve better than what we are getting. We have drawn a line in the sand of our mind. We feel like we have taken enough and now we are angry about it. That is how lost people view things.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:14.

It is also used in the Bible to warn us of apostasy. This is what characterizes apostates. There is a bitterness at work, a dissatisfaction with God and his ways and the truth. And so there is this departure from God, a departure from the truth. And we said this morning that bitterness opens the door to all kinds of unfaithfulness, unfaithfulness chiefly toward God, of course, but if you were to examine marriages where there has been unfaithfulness, if you were to examine friendships where there has been unfaithfulness, if you were to examine moral unfaithfulness, just someone who has professed to know Christ and they have been in the church, but now they have sort of swerved out of the way in the moral realm, this threat of bitterness tends to run through all of those things, that somehow I feel like I have been mistreated or I have not gotten my due. It is an under the sun approach to dealing with anger. It is man's best attempt to deal with his anger apart from God.

And so when someone is habitually angry and habitually bitter, they are giving evidence that they are not converted at all.

So we took our time this morning. If you weren't here, I would just encourage you to get the CD and listen to it because we took our time to recognize what bitterness is.

Now tonight, as we said, we have come back to ask the question: Now how can I keep my life free from it? This is what we are being told to do in Ephesians 4:31. Look again at what it says.

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you.”<sup>3</sup>

Put it away. And not just some of it, not in just some of its forms, but we are being told in verse 31 that the believer is to remove, see this sin removed from his or her life in a comprehensive fashion. All bitterness, all these expressions of anger, all forms of wickedness we are to be putting away, putting off.

The question is: How do you do that? You know, one of the things that we ought to always do, when we are looking at a passage of Scripture and we are exhorted to take action like we are here, we ought to just assume that the answer in terms of how to do it is right here, it is contained here. What we ought not to do is say, “Well, now God has told me to put it away. Let me figure out how to do that.”

Now we don't need human wisdom here. Rather, we ought to ask, “God, have you in this passage indicated to us how we actually go about obeying the exhortation here, the commandment here to put it away? Have you instructed us in how to do that?”

And I believe that he has in the larger context.

In fact, let me just say this. The overarching answer to the question: How do I put this away, is really found when you look at the entire section. And that is we must be convinced that bitterness is completely inconsistent with the Christian's profession. It is

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:31.

completely inconsistent with everything we say we have experienced in the gospel. As I said this morning, there is nothing about bitterness that speaks of the new nature. There is nothing about bitterness that speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing about bitterness that accords with the gospel. There is nothing about bitterness that is Christ like.

So I must recognize that the way I am to remain free from this sin is to first of all acknowledge I can't live in this and live a life that is consistent with my profession of faith in Jesus Christ. If I am going to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, then I must take action when it comes to this sin.

Well, how do I do that? Well, I think there are at least four things we see here in the entire section. Let me give you the first one. If I am to take action on this sin in a gospel fashion, first of all, I must acknowledge that living in Christ means a new lifestyle. If I really have trusted in Jesus as my Lord and Savior, if I have experienced the new birth, if the Holy Spirit lives in me, I must be convinced that this will result ultimately as a pattern as a rule it is going to result in a new way of living. Christianity means a new life.

Look back to verse 17.

“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.”<sup>4</sup>

That is to say you once did, of course, because you were a lost man or a woman just like the rest of the world outside of Christ is right now. That is who you were. But that is not who you are anymore. And as a result, you must and I must no longer walk as the world outside of Jesus walks. What characterizes the world outside of Jesus. What is true of the world outside of Christ? Well, there is this futility of thinking in the vain or the futile way that they think, the futility of their minds.

Kelly talked about it earlier. There is a kind of wisdom, but it is earthly, it is natural, it is demonic. It is unfruitful. There is nothing heavenly about it, nothing holy about it, nothing godly about it, nothing that will stand the test of eternity in terms of pleasing God about it and so I must realize that the thinking of the world is contrary to the wisdom of God and, therefore, I must not think in a way that agrees with the world. As a believer, I must think in a way that agrees with God.

Verse 18.

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!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4:17.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:18-20.

In other words, Paul is saying, “Listen. When you were first presented with the gospel, the gospel message itself declared to you that following Christ would mean turning from the world to him, turning from sin to follow him, turning from a vain life that we inherited from our forefathers to follow Jesus. It means turning to follow the Son of God. You learned this in the gospel.”

Verse 21.

“...assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

Here is what you were taught at the very outset, at the very beginning.

“...to put off your old self.”<sup>7</sup>

I am going to leave behind an old life. I am going to leave behind an old me. The things that belong, verse 22:

“...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.”<sup>8</sup>

Now stop there. Here is the second thing I have got to acknowledge. First of all, following Christ means a new way of living, a new way of thinking, a new set of attitudes, a new perspective on life. It is a new life that I have embraced in Jesus.

But here is a second thing it means. To be a Christian means that I am a new self. If I really know Jesus I am a new creation. I have a new nature. The me that I am now in Jesus has been created. I wasn't born this way. The me, who I am now in Christ, came in to being through new birth.

Notice what he says in verse 22. This is what was announced to us in the gospel that we put off our own self.

Verse 23, we are renewed in the spirit of our minds.

Verse 24, and we “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”<sup>9</sup>

The new nature has been made in the image of its Creator. The new nature accords with God himself. The new nature agrees with that which is holy and that which is righteous and that which is God pleasing.

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<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:21.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:22.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:22-23.

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 4:24.

We are going to talk about this a little bit more later on. But one of the things it allows the believer to live a bitterness free life, we had absolutely nothing to do with and that is the Lord has absolutely transformed us in our very nature so that it is supernaturally natural for us to agree with God about these things that we have put bitterness out of our lives. We don't want to walk in bitterness.

In fact, if we are born again we can't habitually live in it. We must get things right. We must be a people who are easy to be reconciled with. We must be a people who forgive. We must be a people who don't hold anger in our hearts. Why? Because that is not us anymore. That is who we used to be, but that is not who we are now that we are new creatures, new creations in Christ Jesus.

So I acknowledge that salvation means a new way of living. I acknowledge in my own mind and heart that salvation means a new person, a new self, a new life.

There is a third thing we see in this section. All of this gets worked out practically because I am now sensitive to a new Lord. I am now the property of, the possession of the Lord God himself, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit has taken up residence in us and now we are sensitive to his leadership and bitterness is contrary to the way in which he would lead us.

Notice Paul applies what he has just said to us about the new life and the new creation in verse 25.

Therefore, because Christianity means a new way of living and because you are a new creation, "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."<sup>10</sup>

You see, the reality of the gospel is operating in our thinking. We realize that we are one body in Christ. This is getting worked out practically. The gospel is being worked out practically.

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.<sup>11</sup>

We are now mindful of the fact that we have a real enemy and he prowls about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. We are sensitive to these spiritual realities. we were not sensitive to before.

Verse 28.

"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."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 4:25.

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 4:26-27.

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 4:28.

Now we are fundamentally not operating as selfish people, but selfless people. We want to be used by the Lord in the lives of others.

“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.”<sup>13</sup>

We not only want to be a blessing in the material realm, we want to be a blessing to others in the spiritual realm, even what comes out of our mouths. We want it to build others up. We want to be instruments for edification.

What is this? Just is just a practical outworking of a new way of living because we are new people.

But notice where this all comes down to in verse 30.

He says, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”<sup>14</sup>

We have talked about it in other places, but the Holy Spirit is himself the seal. He is God’s guarantee to us of our future, of our inheritance. The moment you were saved he took up residence in your life. Now he leads us and guides us and comforts us and teaches us and warms us. He is present in us that we might know the truth and walk in the truth and, as a believer, now I am sensitive to this. I don’t want to think in a way, I don’t want to feel in a way, I don’t want to speak in a way, I don’t want to behave in a way that would grieve him. I am sensitive to the lordship of Jesus Christ in my life, Christ in me in the person of the Holy Spirit. I am sensitive to what would please God and hat would grieve the heart of God and I now what to put away anything that would grieve the heart of God and guess what? Bitterness grieves the Spirit. Bitterness, all of these sins have been mentioned here. These things grieve the Lord.

Can I just ask you tonight. Does that matter to you? Does it matter to you what pleases the Lord and what grieves him? Does it matter to you what pleases the Lord and that which would quench his working in your life?

You know, we recognize the limitation of human language and God in his Word communicates to us in ways that we are able to identify with, but one of the things that you will learn in the Christian life is one of the ways the Lord disciplines us—if I could say it this way—is by withdrawing what we can sensibly know as his help.

When we allow sin, known sin, to abide in our lives, to remain in our life, sometimes the way the Lord makes us aware of that is he just leaves us to what we can do on our own. There is that sense of misery and emptiness even as a believer that we can know because

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<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 4:29.

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 4:30.

we are allowing something to remain in our life that doesn't please God, that grieves his Spirit.

Have you known what it is to almost, it is as if the Lord is blowing? It is like wind at your back in the sails of your ship? Things seem almost easy as life goes forward. There is joy. There is peace. There is satisfaction. There is the sense that all is well. And I am not talking about materially, because in some of the cases you have known as a believer, things couldn't have been worse on a material level. But everything was well, why? Because you were living a life where you were dealing with sin, confessing sin, removing sin. You were seeking to please the Lord. You weren't grieving him, quenching his work in your life.

Do you know that right now? Do you know that sense of blessing right now? Joy, peace, purpose? If not, could it be because there is this bitterness that you are not dealing with in an obedient fashion?

And so I acknowledge that following Christ means a new way of living. I acknowledge that following Christ means a new person. I acknowledge that following Christ means a new Lord. I am to care and I will care ultimately about what pleases him and what doesn't please him and I have submitted my life to him. I belong to him.

But there is a fourth thing we see here and that is that Christianity means I acknowledge that I have a new future, because he is careful to tell us in verse 30:

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”<sup>15</sup>

For the day when our sanctification is complete, when glorification has occurred, when everything that we have been promised in Christ is now reality.

You see, our life is headed somewhere and bitterness doesn't agree with where we are headed. No, if I want to live in light of my future, if I want to live in light of what the Lord has done in saving me, then I have got to take the actions described in verses 31 and 32. I have got to let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and all these things be put away from me because none of it accords with the new way of living, the new life, the new Lord or the new future.

One day we are going to stand before the Lord Jesus, aren't we? And what are we going to say to him about the anger that we have held on to in our lives? What are we going to say to him about relationships that are fractured that we have not done everything that we have done within our power to make those things right? What are we going to say to him when we have been fully and freely forgiven about relationships where we refuse to forgive? I mean, we have got to think about that future, don't we?

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<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 4:30.



In fact, I will tell you something sobering to think about, that in some cases when you see believers who are at odds with each other and can't get right with one another, can you imagine one day as they meet in heaven what are we going to say to one another when we refuse to love each other and to be in one accord here on earth?

So if we ask: How do we take the action necessary to be free from bitterness? The first thing we can say is we need to think in accordance with the gospel and recognize that this sin is absolutely inconsistent with our profession as a Christian so that we are absolutely committed to comprehensively dealing with it so that there will be no vestiges of it in our lives.

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger...”<sup>16</sup>

I just want to ask you tonight. Are you committed to that, to a bitterness free life, because you are a follower of Christ?

But notice we don't have to stop there, because there is another clue given to us about how to be free from it. The first and the overarching thing is a gospel perspective. But the second thing is bitterness has to be replaced. Not only does it have to be recognized, but it has got to be replaced.

Verse 31.

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”<sup>17</sup>

That is the old self.

Verse 32.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”<sup>18</sup>

And I would suggest tonight that this is both a way to be free from bitterness and evidence that you are.

If you want to ask whether or not you hold bitterness toward a person, whether or not you have taken the steps to be free from bitterness toward that person, here are some questions you can ask yourself or here are some things you can examine yourself in the light of.

First of all, if we are free from bitterness, there will be kindness toward the person you have been angry towards.

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<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 4:30.

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 4:31.

<sup>18</sup> Ephesians 4:32.

He says in verse 32, “Be kind to one another.”<sup>19</sup>

You can’t be kind towards someone if you are hard hearted toward them. You can’t be kind towards someone if you are angry with them.

For each of these things I thought about biblical examples. And I want to return to what we mentioned this morning, Joseph. Now there is Joseph having been, you know, entirely mistreated by his brothers. They knew it. And they said to themselves, we have acted in an evil way toward him. He is going to hate us. In fact, we want to remind him that our dad asked that he would forgive us.

I mean, they are frightened. And in Genesis 50 verse 20, as Joseph puts it in perspective and acknowledges his trust in sovereign God and that God has a plan and a purpose even in what his brothers had done to him, he says this. The Bible says this.

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.<sup>20</sup>

Isn’t that amazing? I mean, the Old Testament is so rich because it gives us the living examples of the very things we are being taught about in the New Testament. Here was Joseph free from bitterness, acknowledging God’s sovereignty and one of the evidences that he was bitterness free is that he was able to be kind to these brothers. He spoke kindly to them.

In fact, here is this man who has been mistreated and he is comforting them.

Kindness.

Is there someone in the world tonight that you have a hard time being kind to? I mean, you just are not friendly to them, kind to them. Oh, do you think you may have some bitterness to them? I mean, if you can’t be kind to them, could you be bitter toward them? I would say you are.

But notice that the passage doesn’t just say kindness, does it? Verse 32.

“Be ye kind to one another.”<sup>21</sup>

What is the next word? Tenderhearted.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 50:20.

<sup>21</sup> Ephesians 4:32.

Want to know whether or not we are bitterness free? Well, that person that I have been angry toward, do I genuinely care for them?

To be tenderhearted means my affections are sensitive to you. My heart cares about you. In fact, instead of hard heartedness, there is tender heartedness which is to say there is even a measure of understanding.

One of the ways that we overcome bitterness, remember we talked about this gospel perspective. One of the ways that we overcome bitterness is to realize the true nature of the human condition. We don't have unbiblical expectations of people.

Do you know why we get bitter? Because we have unbiblical expectations of people.

No, there is an understanding that everyone's need is the Lord. Some of the people who have hurt us they are just lost. They need Jesus. And even if we have been hurt by a fellow believer, the book of James says we all stumble in many ways. I will talk more about that in a moment.

But where there is forgiveness, where there is not bitterness, we care. There is tenderheartedness.

Again, going back to the Genesis passage the Bible says Joseph said this, "So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones."<sup>22</sup>

I mean, he is going to meet their needs. And The Bible says he didn't just speak kindly to them, he comforted them. Now that is an affections word. He saw them weeping and he wept, saw them afraid and he wept. His heart was not hard toward them. His heart was soft toward them.

Again, is there someone in the world tonight that your heart is just not soft toward them? You don't really care for them.

Third, verse 32.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another."<sup>23</sup>

The bitter free life is a life of forgiveness, true forgiveness.

I want you to keep your Bible marker here and go to the book of Matthew and look at chapter 18. Now we looked this morning or we mentioned it, Peter's question for Christ. And notice how our Lord follows that up.

Verse 21.

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<sup>22</sup> Genesis 50:21.

<sup>23</sup> Ephesians 4:32.

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?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.<sup>24</sup>

I mean, this is an unimaginable amount. There is no way the person could ever pay it.

“And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.”<sup>25</sup>

The king began with justice, right?

“So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’”<sup>26</sup>

Which was unreasonable. He could have never done it, but he is asking for some kind of mercy.

Verse 27.

“And out of pity for him...”<sup>27</sup>

His heart is soft toward this person.

“...the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.”<sup>28</sup>

Now he doesn't say, “Pay me back over time.” He says, “I wipe it out.”

“But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.”<sup>29</sup>

Folks, by comparison this is nothing. Right? Ten thousand talents versus 100 denarii. It is nothing.

And notice how he responds to his fellow servant.

...and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’  
So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with

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<sup>24</sup> Mathew 18:21-24.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 18:25.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 18:26.

<sup>27</sup> Mathew 18:27.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 18:28.

me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”<sup>30</sup>

Why does Jesus follow Peter’s question with this parable? Because if you and I ever really grasp what we have been forgiven of, we will immediately realize there is nothing that we can’t forgive. There is nothing that even begins to touch the hem of a garment of that which we have been forgiven of. If you can understand that, would you say amen?

You see, we don’t have a right to hold anyone’s debt against them when we realize what a debt we have been forgiven of. This is the mark of a true believer. We understand we have been forgiven, don’t we? And, as a result, it is supernaturally natural for us to be a forgiving people. We realize we are forgiven. I think this is one of the things, too, by the way, just a quick side note, that this generation in the Church is missing in the preaching of the gospel. We have preached Jesus as if he has offered to mankind to satisfy all of their felt needs. When the truth of the matter is the center point of the gospel is that we are guilty and deserve damnation. And the question is: Is there any way for us to be forgiven? And the answer is: Jesus died to pay for all the sins of all those who will trust in him. That is what has happened to us in Jesus. We have been forgiven. And, therefore, there is nothing that we should say I will not forgive it.

Look back at our passage, Ephesians four.

How do we overcome this sin of bitterness? Well, we have a gospel perspective. New life, new creature, new Lord, new future. And we have got to live a life that is in accordance with that. And then specifically we replace the old way of living with new things. There must... and this is not just what we do it is what is an evidence that we have done it. There is kindness. There is tenderheartedness. There is true forgiveness from the heart.

But here is the fourth thing we see in verse 32. When you are living this bitterness free life, you have a reason for it. There will be a clear... in your own mind there will be a clear mind for your freedom from bitterness.

Why do you not hold on to anger? Why do you not hold on to someone else’s debts? Why do you forgive them from your heart? Why do you go on forgiving them seventy times seven? Why do you keep forgiving them?

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew 21:28-35.

End of verse 32.

“As God in Christ forgave you.”<sup>31</sup>

We keep on forgiving because we are forgiven. We keep on forgiving for the sake of Christ. This is why we are bitterness free. It is because the bitterness of our life of bondage has been forgiven and we have been set free.

Now the book of Colossians has the exact same message. Look over to Colossians chapter three. Notice, again, this pattern we have seen in Ephesians four. It is here all over again.

“If then you have been raised with Christ...”<sup>32</sup>

Have you been raised with Christ? Do you know the Lord? Are you truly saved? Well, then:

...seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.<sup>33</sup>

Realize where you are headed.

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you.”<sup>34</sup>

I mean the flesh is still present, beloved. We still battle with sin. We are still going to battle with bitterness. But we must to death that is earthly within us.

...sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.

But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

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<sup>31</sup> Ephesians 4:32.

<sup>32</sup> Colossians 3:1.

<sup>33</sup> Colossians 3:-4.

<sup>34</sup> Colossians 3:5.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other...<sup>35</sup>

You say, "I have got a complaint. What should I do with my complaint?"

Well, what does that verse say you should do with it? If one has a complaint against another, what should you do? What does the Bible say? Forgive each other.

Notice:

...as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.<sup>36</sup>

This is the Christian life.

Look back at Ephesians four.

So we have seen what bitterness is. We see in the passage itself how it is overcome, a gospel perspective. And we realize we have got to live a life consistent with that gospel message. And then where these old attitudes, these old things that belong to our old life, instead of those things, we put on new garments, new clothing as kindness and tenderheartedness and true forgiveness. And there is a reason for all of it. It is what God has done for us in Christ.

So what do we do practically? How do we take action on this tonight? If today even the Lord has brought to your mind some area of bitterness in your life, someone you are struggling with, someone you could not be kind toward, someone you are... you feel like you are not ready to forgive them, right? What should you do with this?

And I want to give you two things. One, some principles and then I am going to wrap it up with a personal testimony, but first some principles.

Number one, fully acknowledge and confess your bitterness to the Lord. You always begin with God. And where you are aware of bitterness you must see it as sin. Call it what it is. It is wickedness. Deal with it for what it is. It cannot be present in your life. You must fully acknowledge it and confess it to the Lord. And then as you do that, acknowledge and give God thanks that you are forgiven of this sin in Christ if you know Jesus. Thank him for his forgiveness even for this bitterness that you have been struggling with. And then you submit yourself, your heart, your mind, your body, your life to the Lord afresh and anew.

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<sup>35</sup> Colossians 3:5-13.

<sup>36</sup> Colossians 3:13-15.

Here I am, Lord, Romans 12, a living sacrifice ready to do your will.

Then, second, after we have dealt with God directly, we obey God by making those relationships right to the extent that we are able in a way that is biblical which is to say where you have wounded someone else, you ask for their forgiveness or if someone has wounded you, you grant forgiveness.

You not only thank the Lord for his forgiveness toward you, you then extend his forgiveness toward the offender. You grant them forgiveness.

Well, what if they haven't asked for forgiveness? You still forgive them from your heart in order that you might now begin to pray for them in a redemptive way.

The word of God if it is... there are some many ways we can describe it. But one of the ways it is just real. It never presents us the picture that is not reality. And Romans 12 you get a picture of the difficulty of human relationships.

Romans 12:12 says this.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."<sup>37</sup>

That is, you could be used of God as an instrument to bring that person under conviction and to the point of repentance.

I ask you. Do you care whether or not he repents? Do you want him to repent? Do you want him to be right with God? Do you want his life transformed?

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."<sup>38</sup>

So you fully acknowledge to the Lord your bitterness and then you take action in the human realm as much as depends on you to make those relationships right.

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<sup>37</sup> Romans 12:12-20.

<sup>38</sup> Romans 12:21.



You just do all of this godwardly. That is, you do this for the sake of the Lord. In fact, you may even find that as you attempt to make some of these relationships right, you are rebuffed. It doesn't matter. You are not doing it for their sake, not ultimately. That is a secondary motivation. But you are doing it for the Lord's sake, to obey him. And you must do this patiently. You must do this committed to a long term enduring obedience.

Can I tell you a secret? Bitterness wants to come back. Does anybody know that that is true?

You say, "I have forgiven it. I have filed it away." And all of the sudden what happens? Something... they will act in a way, they will say something in a way, they will do something in a way that just reminds you all over again of what they have done.

Well, when do I have a right to stop forgiving? You don't. Be prepared to endure in the way of obedience. That is, every time it comes up you have got to deal with it obediently all over again.

There is a third practical thing I would say. Walk with people who are committed to being free from this sin. Bitterness is a poisonous influence. It defiles that which it comes in contact with. If you make as your companions people who are bitter, don't be surprised when their bitterness rubs off on you.

There can be people who are the objects of redemptive ministry who are struggling with bitterness, but even then you must be careful. You make your companions, your close friends, people who are walking in some kind of bitterness and it will not be long before their bitterness begins to influence your perspectives.

Now a personal testimony. I thought about this this evening driving up here actually, well, a little bit before that. But I was thanking the Lord that as best as I can know myself and I grant that I don't know myself the way the Lord does, but I can truthfully say that as a pattern, God has given me grace to live a bitterness free life. He really has. I am not saying I have never struggled with it. We have all struggled with it, haven't we?

But I have thought to myself. Now, Richard, what has been the key for you? What is it that has allowed you to have a heart that is not full of bitterness about... to my knowledge right now anything? So how does that happen?

Just real quickly let me share some things that came to mind. First of all, the first thing, the most important thing, the most fundamental thing is I realize the Lord has done something in me that I had nothing to do with. That is, he has saved me. And as we said tonight, our new nature has been created in accordance with righteousness and godliness.

We want to do... every believer, fundamentally at the bottom, we want to do what pleases the Lord, don't we? So if there is something that would grieve his Spirit, something that wouldn't be right according to his Word, look, we want to walk in obedience there.

That is why I ask you. Are you born again? Do you want to obey the Lord in this area?

Second, I am reminded, daily of what I have been given in Christ. I have been forgiven a debt that there is no way to measure it. Who am I to hold unforgiveness toward anyone? I am... listen. I am the chief of sinners. The Lord has forgiven me of everything. How can I refuse to forgive someone else?

Third, I am reminded of what the Lord has commanded. I have been commanded to put this away. So at the bottom, there is enough reason right there. God commands us tonight to put away our bitterness and on a daily basis I need to remind myself and I have. I don't have a right to be angry. I don't have a right to hold on to hurt. I don't have a right to feel betrayed. I don't have a right to hold on to unforgiveness. I don't have that right.

Fourth, as we saw this morning, I am reminded of who is in charge of my life. I have to remind myself of that just like you are going to have to remind yourself of that. Every day I have got to remind myself. These are not random events. Things are not just happening. The sovereign God who created everything also runs everything. And my life is in his hand and no matter what I come in contact with, each day it has a purpose.

I am mindful of the fact that I have an enemy and what the Lord would use to prove his work in my life. The enemy wants to take advantage of and turn it into some kind of failure in my life. I don't want that to happen. I want to remain submitted to the Lord so that his work in my life is proven over time. I know who is in charge.

I am also, finally, reminded of my future, that one day I will stand before the Lord Jesus and I will have to give an account to him for my heart condition. And I want to be able to stand before him one day and say, "Lord, to the best of my knowledge I have not held on to anger. I have not held on to real or imagined wrongs done to me."

In fact, folks, listen. If we know ourselves at all, don't we recognize that we have hurt others probably far more than they have hurt us. And if we need others to be patient and merciful and kind and forgiving toward us, then let us be patient and kind and merciful and forgiving toward others.

How many here tonight you are aware, like I am, that you stumble in many ways? Would you say amen? Now are you going to need mercy? You are going to need understanding. Are you going to need patience? Are you going to need forgiveness? Well, then ought we not to extend that to others? And we have been forgiven of everything. Therefore let us forgive everything.

We can't do it apart from Jesus, can we? We need God's grace and God's Spirit to live in accordance with the gospel. My brothers and sisters would say amen.

Let's pray together.

*Lord, we thank you for your patience with us. You have been kind. You have had pity upon us. Lord, these things that you call upon us to demonstrate and these things that would be in accordance with the gospel, these are the very things that we have experienced from you, forgiveness. And these things are produced by your Spirit and we cannot apart from Christ live this life. So I pray for myself and my brethren that, Lord, wherever we become aware of some kind of anger that we are holding on to, that that very point, Lord, we would run to you and acknowledge it and confess it as the sin that it is and turn from it. I pray, Father, that we would be quick when we are aware of what we have done wrong and take the steps necessary to be right with people, to run, as it were, to them and to confess what we have done wrong and to ask of their forgiveness. And, Lord, where anyone has asked us for forgiveness, I pray that we would be easy to reconcile with and we would forgive from our hearts.*

*Help us, Father, to live watchful, vigilant lives, to watch over our hearts with all diligence realizing that from our inner man flow the issues of life. And help us to remember, Lord, that we will stand before you one day and strive to live a life that will be pleasing to you on that day. We recognize, Lord, that apart from our Savior's perfect and finished work we are despicable creatures and we could not stand before you accepted. Lord, help us to grasp, even in some small measure how much we have been forgiven of. And we know, Lord, that as we do that, it will help us to forgive others as you have forgiven us in Christ. We pray for this in Jesus' name. Amen.*