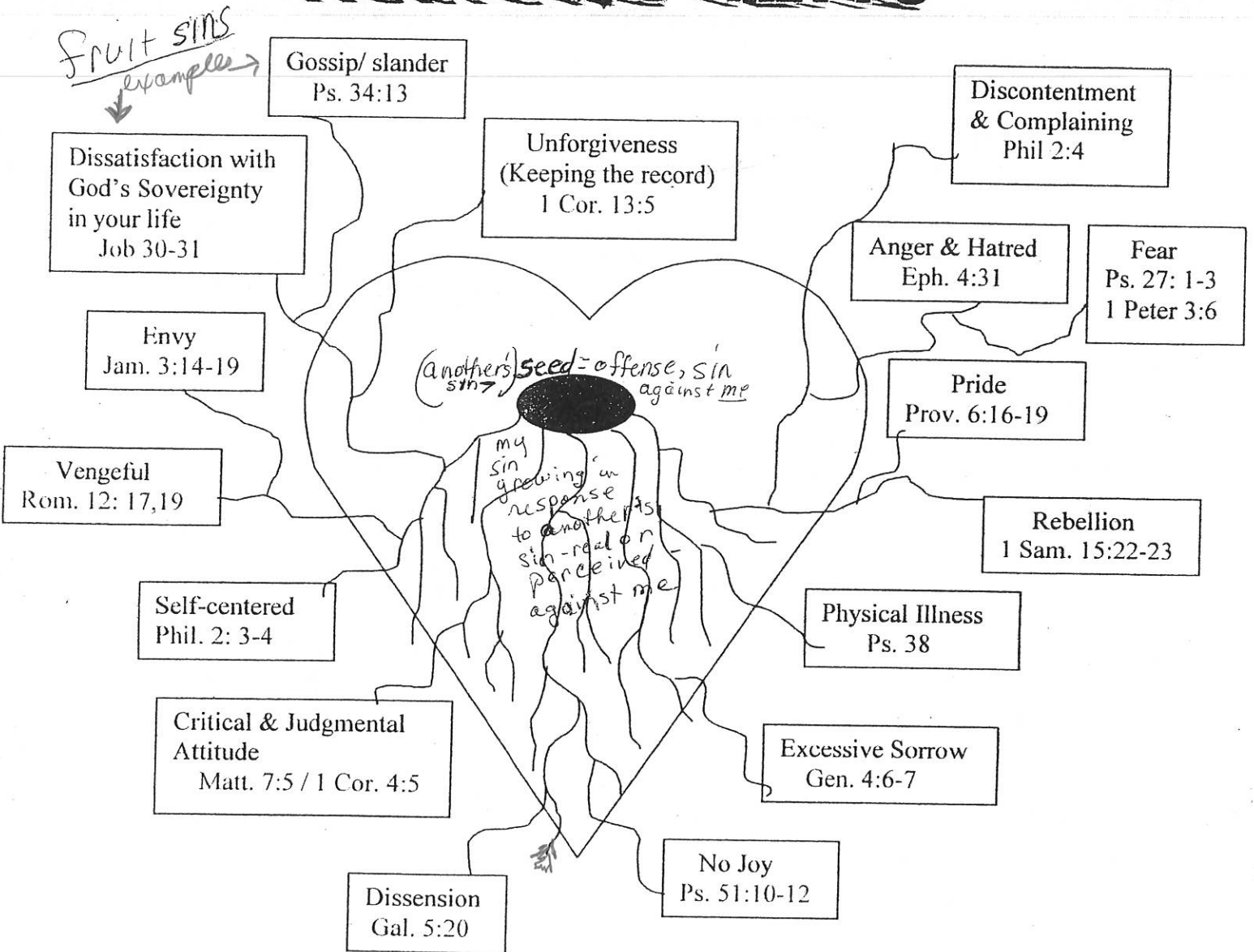


# Root of Bitterness

## Hebrews 12:15



Suffered Wrong → Replay event over and over in your mind. → Pain Intensifies → Your sin will likely multiply

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# HOW TO BE FREE FROM BITTERNESS

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Jim Wilson

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 4:31-5:2).

In our text we are instructed to get rid of all bitterness. Before we begin discussing how and why this must be done, it is crucial to realize that the basis for all our actions in this regard must be what Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross. In all our actions, we are to be imitators of God.

In the Old Testament, there was a woman whose name meant Pleasant. Her name was Naomi and she had moved from Israel to another land with her husband and sons. But her husband had died and within the next ten years both of her sons died. She made some comments to her recently widowed daughters-in-law about it.

Ruth 1:13b: "... it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!" She was comparing in order to determine who had the right to be more bitter.

And in Ruth 1:20-21: "So she said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?' "

Her bitterness was toward God. It was God who had taken away her husband; it was God who had taken away her sons, and she held it against Him. Five times in these three verses she held God accountable for her bitterness.

There are many people like this today. Not

only are they bitter, they enjoy being bitter. They somehow like it, and they feed on it. They wouldn't know what to do if they got rid of it; they wouldn't have a purpose for living. They like being bitter.

We know people like that in the world, and we know people like that in the church. It is easy to recognize when somebody is bitter. You can see it in the eyes, and in the lines of the face—even if the person is young. You can see it in their mouth, you can see it when they're smiling or laughing. They are bitter and you can see it. You can hear it in the tone of their voices. You can hear it when they protest that they are not bitter. The bitterness is central, and pervades everything.

There are bitter people in the Bible besides Naomi. In fact, there are quite a few. For example, Jonah was a bitter man. The Lord said to him, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die" (Jon. 4:9).

He thought he had a right to his anger. *I like being angry. God, you are wrong to forgive people. I don't want you to forgive people.*

People enjoy holding things against other people. But our text requires us to remove all bitterness, and to maintain a tender heart. Here's the question: Is it possible to be kind, compassionate, tenderhearted and yet bitter at the same time? These are all interior attitudes. Tenderheartedness, by definition, involves a tender heart. Bitterness is also on the inside. But it is not possible to have two different, contradictory attitudes on the inside.

Paul says to get rid of all bitterness, and to be kind and compassionate one to another. Therefore, the bitterness must go. But before it can be removed, it is necessary to know what it is—and that it is there.

It is relatively easy to see when other people are bitter. But it's not so easy to see it in ourselves. It is therefore important to have a good understanding of the Bible's definition of the problem.

Let us suppose that a Christian commits a sin. He tells a lie, for instance. Now when he tells this lie, does he feel guilty or does he feel bitter? The answer is guilty. When we sin, we feel guilty. It is straightforward. Now let us suppose that someone told a lie about this same Christian and spread it all over town. What does

he feel now— guilt or bitterness?

Guilt is what we feel when we sin, and *bitterness is what we feel when others sin against us*. The very definition of bitterness points to the action of another. If we had committed the offense, we would feel guilty and would know that we had to confess and forsake our sin.

We might not confess the sin, but not because we did not know what to do. But what do we do with the guilt of others? Bitterness is always based upon someone else's sin—whether real or imagined.

Consider the imaginary sin first. Many times we can be bitter toward someone for what he said, when in reality he did not say it. We heard a false report, and now we are bitter. We wait for an apology which he cannot offer. Shall we remain in bitterness the rest of our lives because he never says he is sorry for something he did not do?

Incidentally, many bitter people cannot imagine the possibility that they are bitter over imaginary sins. As far as bitterness is concerned, the other person's guilt is always real. For such a person trying to be free from bitterness, it is acceptable for them to assume the real guilt of the other person, *so long as they get rid of their own bitterness*.

But what about genuine sin? There are many bitter people who really were mistreated by the offender. So how do we deal with a genuine offense?

Bitterness is based on sin that somehow relates to you. It is not concerned with how big the sin is; it is based upon how close it is. For instance, if some great and gross immorality occurs in Iran, Iraq, El Salvador, or Colombia, what do we do? We read about it, but we will not feel guilty. We read about it, but we will not feel bitter. We might be appalled or amazed, but we do not feel guilty, and we do not feel bitter. Nevertheless, it was an awful sin, and someone actually committed it. So it does not depend on how great the evil is, *it depends on how close the other person is to me*. Bitterness is related to those people who are close.

Who are likely candidates? The answer is simple: fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, children, boyfriends, girlfriends, roommates, immediate superiors, immediate subordinates, co-workers, business partners, and maybe some other relatives—grandparents, uncles, and others. There are even many people

who are bitter against God.

We do not get bitter towards evil outside of our own immediate contact. Bitterness is based upon somebody else's sin who is close to us, and who did something to us. It might be minor. It does not have to be great, *it just has to be close*. Does he pick up his socks? No? Can you get bitter over that? Well, no, but what if he does it 5,000 times?

You may think you have a right to be bitter. But the Bible does not grant anyone the right to be bitter. The text says *to get rid of all bitterness*.

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Heb. 12:15).

Here it describes bitterness as if it were a root. A root is something that is underground and cannot be seen. But there can be visible evidence of its presence, as when sidewalks are lifted.

Roots do other things. The fact that you cannot see roots does not mean they are not there. Neither does it mean you will never see them. They drink in nourishment, and they do not stay roots. Eventually they come up.

The fruit that is born bears a direct relation to the root producing it. The roots of an apple tree provide us with apples. If there is a bitter root, it will bear bitter fruit.

That is what this verse is saying. Beware lest any root of bitterness spring up, cause trouble, and defile many people, which means to make many people filthy. Have you ever seen bitterness go through a church? Bitterness can go through a congregation like a prairie fire. It can go through the work place or a dormitory. Why is this? Somebody decided to share. He was bitter, let the root come to the surface and bear fruit. He shared it and many people became bitter. The author of Hebrews warns us about this. He says beware of missing the grace of God. When you allow it, bitterness comes up and defiles many people. It makes many people filthy.

What happens to a person if he keeps bitterness on the inside for many years? What happens to him physically? Can he get physically sick? Suppose it is bitterness toward some member of the family. He's kept it inside, he has not shared it. He has not defiled many people—he has kept it down inside. When he keeps it inside for some years, he finally begins to hurt. He goes to the doctor and the doctor says, "You are right, you are sick. But your sickness is not the kind I

deal with. I am going to send you to the other kind of doctor."

So he sends him to the psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist agrees. "Yes, you are sick all right. And I know why you are sick. You are sick because of 20 years of bitterness towards your father. You have kept it suppressed all these years and it's just rotted out your insides. You have kept this poison within and this acid on the inside has made you just physically ill. So what I want you to do is I want you to go home and share it with your father. Why keep it in and get sick? Let it out. Get everybody else sick."

So the world has two solutions. Keep the bitterness in, and make yourself sick, or let it out and spread the sickness around. God's solution is to dig up the root. Get rid of it. *But this takes the grace of God.* A man must know the Lord Jesus Christ to be able to do this. He is the source of grace.

The world's solutions for bitterness shouldn't be used by Christians. When Christians copy the world, they have two poor choices. The Bible says to get rid of all bitterness. You must not keep it in and you must not share it. Surrender it to the Father, through the Son.

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (James 3:14,15).

When I was a young midshipman at the Naval Academy, I thought that the pettiness and jealousy I observed would give way to maturity. I thought the higher you got in rank, the more mature you became, the less this sort of thing occurred. But as I grew older I found out that the jealousy just got more intense. *Bitterness accumulates.* Unless there's a solution to it, people do not get less bitter with maturity. They get more bitter over the years. It gets worse and worse.

And if you harbor bitter envy, evil practice will result. It does not come from heaven. It is straight from the pit and is of the devil. Every evil practice results from this attitude. As should be obvious, we have a real problem. How do we get rid of bitterness?

Before we can get rid of bitterness, we have to realize that we are bitter. How can we tell if we are bitter?

One good rule of thumb is this: *Bitterness*

*remembers details.* You have had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you have forgotten. But this one took place five years ago, and you remember every single word, his intonation and the inflection of every part of his voice. You know exactly what happened—which means you are bitter.

Someone might object and say that it is also possible to have a good memory of a wonderful conversation. Is this possible? Yes, but not likely. Why is this? Because memory is helped by *review, review, and more review.* People do not usually mull over the wonderful things as much. But they do go over and over and over the bad things. I have done quite a bit of counseling with people who are in the process of getting divorced. I have known some since the time they were married, at a happier time in their life. But at the time of the divorce they cannot remember a single happy time. All they can remember is that which they have gone over and over. They are bitter.

This doesn't mean there were not happy times. It just means that they have concentrated on how right they were and how wrong the other person was. If someone has a sharp, detailed memory for things which happened years ago when he was a child, or a young man or woman, and that memory is at all accusative of anyone else, then it is an indication of bitterness. And the solution for bitterness is to get rid of it.

I had a wonderful experience one time in Dallas, Texas. I was speaking on a Saturday night at the home of an old friend. Because I was going to be in Dallas, I wrote notes to several people that I'd known from different parts of the country at other times, and they showed up at this home.

My host asked me to speak on bitterness, which I did. Afterwards, a couple came up to see me. I had known them eight years before in Pullman, Washington. The wife came up to me and said, "We have been married for eight years. The first year of marriage I was so bitter toward my mother that I laid it on my husband every single day. Our first year of marriage was just awful because I kept sharing this bitterness toward my mother with my husband."

She then told me that seven years ago I had spoken on bitterness and she had gotten rid of hers. One day she saw another woman who was really bitter towards her mother. She thought, "I can help that woman. I can share all the com-

mon experiences. I went to her to share this, and I couldn't remember any of the details. My detailed memory had gone. All I could tell her was I used to remember things, and I do not remember them anymore." The Lord had really taken care of her bitterness.

Another time I was teaching a four-week course on marriage. I had put a notice in the paper and did not know who would show up. A woman came who had been referred to the class by a doctor. She came in and I can honestly say that I have never seen anybody more bitter in appearance in my life. She had forty years of accumulated bitterness. She got rid of it that night and made an appointment to see me the next day at the bookstore where I worked. She came in the store, and I did not know who she was. *She looked so different.* I had just met her the night before, but she was clean inside now.

What is the problem? Why is it we do not get rid of bitterness? If I tell a lie, I can confess it and be forgiven. In order to get rid of it I have to bring it back to my own heart. We need to bring the realization of bitterness back to our own hearts. Instead, the temptation is to look at the offender. Look what *he* did. That is the nature of bitterness. In order to get rid of it, I need to recognize it is *my* problem before I can confess and forsake it.

But you say, "I am not bitter. I just get hurt easily." But the symptoms of getting hurt are very close to the symptoms of resentment. Do you know what instant resentment is? You might say, "It is not bitterness—it is just hurt feelings." But there is a close relationship between being hurt and being resentful. Someone gets hurt and he gets resentful. There is another very close connection between resentment and bitterness. Resentment turns into a deep bitterness.

Bitterness is just resentment that has been held on to. It has become rancid and rotten. It is kept in and it gets worse.

The links in the chain continue. There is a connection between bitterness and hatred, and a very clear biblical identification between hatred and murder. What I am saying is that hurt can lead to murder. Some might object that this teaching is too strong. But the strength of it is from the Bible.

What we want to do is make it apparent *how sinful bitterness is*. The bitter person must first recognize that he is bitter, and secondly, that it is a gross evil. Again, the reason people do not

deal with this sin is that they think it is the other person's sin. The devil says, "Well, when he quits lying, or he quits doing this or that, or when he says he's sorry, then you will feel better."

But suppose he does not quit? Suppose he never quits? Are you going to be bitter the rest of your life because someone else insists on being in sin? That does not make any sense at all. You may say, "I will forgive him when he says he is sorry, but not until then. I have a right to my bitterness until then. When he says he is sorry, I will forgive him and everything will be fine." You keep this wall of bitterness up, and one day he comes to you and he says, "I'm sorry." Can you now forgive him? No, because bitterness doesn't forgive. In order to forgive this person when he says he is sorry you have to be ready before he says he is sorry. And if you are ready to forgive him before he says he is sorry, then it doesn't depend on whether he says he is sorry or not. In other words, you get rid of bitterness unilaterally. It does not matter what the other person does.

Earlier the point was made that bitterness seems to stem from the other person's sin—real or imagined. That is only how it appears. In reality bitterness is a sin that stands alone. The bitter person decides to be bitter independently of the offender.

But you say, "No, he sinned against me, and when he says he is sorry everything will be fine." But this is not true.

I've known situations where an apology was offered and the person is still bitter. Suppose the offender is dead and cannot apologize. I know people who are extremely bitter and the bitterness is toward their parents who died years ago. But the bitterness has not died. Bitterness is the sin of the bitter person alone, unrelated to anybody else.

One time I went to the Walla Walla State Penitentiary to spend the day with the inmates. It was around Christmas. I spent about six hours there. During the afternoon, I was in maximum security, talking about and teaching evangelism.

This one fellow asked about reaching the really hard-core criminals. I thought he was really interested in such evangelism and talked to him about it. Then I spent time in minimum security, protective custody and other places. In the evening I was back in maximum security, and thought I'd talk on this subject of bitterness. I figured there were probably some bitter people

there.

This same fellow who asked about evangelism in the afternoon asked me another question. He said, "How can you get rid of bitterness towards somebody who beat up your three-year-old son unmercifully?" So I told him how, and then I said, "You know, when you get rid of your bitterness you can help this person so that he won't beat up other little kids."

He said, "No, this guy cannot be helped."

I said, "Sure, he can."

"No, no."

"Why not?"

"He is not with us any more."

This inmate had murdered him. He had murdered him because of what he had done to his three-year-old son—that's why he was in prison. But even though he had killed the man, *he was still bitter*. In other words, expressing it did not get rid of it.

When somebody else says he is sorry, it does not get rid of our bitterness. The only thing that gets rid of it is confession before God because of the Lord Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. *This is the only solution.*

We must not keep it and we must not share it with others. There is only one thing to do and that is to confess it as a great and evil sin. We must be as persistent in the confession as necessary.

Once I was speaking at Monterey, California, at the U.S. Naval Post-Graduate School. There was a man there who had a great reputation as a Bible teacher. He was a line officer in the Navy, but he had been passed over for the command of a submarine. He did not have command of a submarine and he was bitter. I spoke on confession of sin and bitterness, and he was really wiped out. He came and saw me and got rid of this bitterness. The next morning, his wife said to me, "I've got a new husband." He had been bitter toward the Navy. But it was his sin, not the Navy's.

Amy Carmichael has a note in her little book *If*. "For a cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, however suddenly jolted."<sup>1</sup> If it is full of sweet water and is jolted, what will come out of the cup? Sweet water. If you gave it a harder jolt, what's going to happen? More sweet water. If someone is filled with sweet water and someone else gives him a jolt, what will come out? Sweet water. Jolts do not turn sweet water into bitter water. That is done

by something else.

Jolts only bring out of the container what's already in the container. If you're filled with sweetness and light, and you get jolted, you're going to spill sweetness and light. If you're filled with honey, the honey will come out. If vinegar comes out, what does that prove? It shows what was already in the container. In other words, much bitterness is not based upon what the other person did at all. It is the result of what we do and are.

Many years ago, I was working in our bedroom at my desk. My wife, Bessie, was reading in bed. Whatever I was doing wasn't going well. Bessie said something to me and I turned around and let her have it. It was something unChristian. She looked at me in amazement and got up and left the room. I sat there thinking, "She should not have said it. Look what she said. Look, look, look." I did that for around 10 minutes, maybe longer. I was bitter toward Bessie, but all she did was jolt the cup. What was in the cup came out of the cup.

If I had been filled with sweetness and light, it would not have made any difference. I sat there and thought about what she did. I knew better, because I had already learned this truth about bitterness. Still, I thought about her "sin" because there is enjoyment in accusing the other person. Some people do this for years.

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

I got up off my knees and said, "But look what she said." I got back on my knees.

"God, I'm sorry for what I did. I accept the responsibility. It was my sin, and mine only."

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Carmichael, *If* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, n.d.) p. 46.

In order to get rid of it, I have to see that it is evil, and that it is my sin and my sin only. I do not get rid of it through the other person saying he is sorry. I do not get rid of it if the other person quits or dies. I do not get rid of it any other way except calling it sin against the holy God, confessing it and receiving forgiveness.

The difficulty is in getting my eyes off the other person's sin. But just the fact that I think it is his problem shows that it is not. If it were his problem, and I was filled with sweetness and light, and not bitter, then I would be concerned about the other person.

I could say, "That poor guy! Look what he did. If I did something like that, I would feel awful. He must really feel awful. I think I will go help him." But if that is not my response then I am bitter, and it is my sin, not his.

I believe that this sin is a major hindrance to revival in this country. When Christians start confessing their sins, they will be able to forgive the sins of others.

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# FORGIVING OTHERS

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*Jim Wilson*

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart (Matt. 18:35).

The Lord Jesus Christ is speaking here, and He is giving his followers teaching on forgiveness.

Most of us have had experiences when someone has come to us and asked forgiveness. Other times we have gone to ask for forgiveness.

There are several common responses to such requests, but the one you most often hear is, "There is nothing to forgive." Now this sounds very gracious, but it really is not. It is a means of refusing to forgive.

The person you asked to forgive you knows full well that you need forgiving. But still they dodge the request by saying, "Oh, there's nothing to forgive." They may really think there wasn't any problem, but that's not normally the case.

Sometimes they say, "All right, you are forgiven." They say it because they have to, but that's not what their heart is saying. But the text

requires forgiveness from the heart. In other words, God knows who truly forgives, and who does not. We are also told that God is going to treat each of us in a certain way unless we forgive our brothers from the heart. He does not require us to say the right words. Even though you might convince the person in front of you, you will not convince the One who searches the heart. God knows when you have forgiven your brother from your heart.

We cannot hide from the Lord when we sin in this way. Our hearts are open and manifest to Him. If we are refusing to forgive, then He knows it. He knows our sin, and He certainly knows the requirements of His word concerning forgiveness.

So what does the Bible teach about how our heavenly Father will treat us?

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' (Matt. 18:21).

He thought he was asking a virtuous question.

Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times' (Matt. 18:22).

When Jesus said this, do you think He meant to limit it to seventy-seven? Do we get to count? Are we allowed to keep a record of wrongs?

Anytime someone counts the number of times he has extended forgiveness, then there is no true forgiveness. If you forgave your brother from your heart each time he sinned against you, each instance would seem like the first time.

When Jesus teaches about things like turning the other cheek, people misapply it. They say, "Yes, I will let him hit the other cheek, but if he hits me a third time, I am going to deck him."

But when Jesus taught about turning the other cheek, He was teaching us to do it from the heart. Jesus assumes the other person is sinning against you. He assumes the other person is wrong seven times, seventy-seven times, or four hundred and ninety times. But if you are counting, then you are not forgiving.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlements, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him.

'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart (Matt. 18:23-35).

When we passed from death to life, we were forgiven, and the debt which was eliminated was immense. When we became Christians, we received at that time unconditional forgiveness. It was a gift and we received it without conditions attached. Now there is a difference between conditional forgiveness and unconditional forgiveness.

When we were born again we received unconditional forgiveness. It was a great forgiveness like the forgiveness of the great debt in the parable. In Colossians 3:13, it says,

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

So how did the Lord forgive us? Unconditionally, and we are told to forgive *as we were forgiven*. We are to forgive unconditionally. But suddenly, when it comes to our debtors, we have this conditional forgiveness. Remember how the heavenly Father treats those who behave like the wicked servant in the parable.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matt. 6:12).

The Lord instructed us to pray this way. But

we protest, "God, I don't want to be forgiven this way. If I get forgiven the way I forgive, I'm in big trouble."

The Christian who prays as instructed is praying for conditional forgiveness. In verse fourteen, right after the Lord's prayer, Jesus says, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Is this true? It is the Lord Jesus who said it.

Someone might object, "How can this be? We have received unconditional forgiveness. Now Jesus is saying that if I forgive men when they sin against me, my heavenly Father will also forgive me. But if I do not forgive men their sins, my Father will not forgive my sins. This sounds like conditional forgiveness to me."

Here is why it's conditional. He said when we passed from death to life we were forgiven a great debt. Then we had very clear instructions to forgive as we had been forgiven. We were forgiven unconditionally, and we are told to forgive unconditionally.

If someone is forgiving unconditionally, he doesn't have any problems in praying this. "Lord, forgive me as I forgive." Of course, this forgiveness is unconditional. *There is no contradiction for the Christian who is doing what he is told.* There is only a seeming contradiction when forgiveness is not extended in the same way it is received. This was the problem with the unforgiving servant. He had been forgiven, and then he turned around and did not forgive as he had been forgiven.

This is a powerful statement. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother from your heart, as I forgave you from my heart." If I do not forgive, I have good reason to doubt my salvation.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you

on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them (Matt. 18:15-20).

This passage, which precedes the parable we have examined, also has to do with this heart forgiveness. If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens, you have won your brother over.

You say, "Well, that is not likely to happen. I have tried that. He has sinned against me and I was so mad I went and showed him his faults and it did not win him over at all." This was because you did not go with forgiveness in your heart. This text does not make a lot of sense to many people because they cannot comprehend going to someone this way. "How can you tell somebody who has sinned against you what he's done to you, and expect to win him? He will get defensive."

Why will he get defensive? Because someone is accusing him. But if someone goes with forgiveness in his heart—the final conclusion of all this teaching—then the result will not be accusative.

I can guarantee that he will **not** be won over if his corrector goes with any kind of bitterness, resentment or accusative spirit. The corrector must not go to him in that kind of condition. We may only go to him when there is forgiveness in our hearts *in advance*. This forgiveness is not to be dependent on his repentance. I can guarantee he will not be repentant if he is not approached with forgiveness, from the heart. We must go with love and forgiveness. If he listens, we have won our brother over.

But if he will not listen, even though he has been approached this way, we are to take one or two others along, people with forgiveness in *their* hearts. This is not how it normally happens.

Someone goes with an accusation, the recipient gets defensive and is not won over. So two other people with one side of the story are collected, and they come and back up the initial corrector. They are not successful either.

Everyone must have forgiveness in his heart so that when the offender refuses to repent, it is obviously *his* problem. If he refuses to listen, then the church must be told. Of course, it is also necessary for the church to be full of forgiveness.

There are churches which think they exercise a godly church discipline. They do not, be-

cause this attitude is lacking. They go to this guy, lay it on him, and he refuses it. They get two or three others, and they go lay it on him, and he refuses them too. The church then kicks him out, but there is no forgiveness in the heart. But one of the objects of church discipline is to restore the offender.

If he refuses to listen to the church, he is to be treated as a pagan or a tax collector. I do not believe the Lord Jesus meant as pagans or tax collectors were actually treated. I think he means as pagans and tax collectors should be treated. Earlier, in Matthew 5, Jesus tells us to treat the just and the unjust as the Father does—equitably.

He tells us to love our enemies. So even when we treat them as pagans and tax collectors, it is still loving treatment. It merely means they are considered outside the fellowship, but with love and forgiveness from the heart. They just do not want the forgiveness which the godly have extended from the heart. It is because of this teaching that Peter asked the question which led to the parable. "How many times should I forgive my brother?" "Love...keeps no record of wrongs" (I Cor. 13:4,5). Love does not keep score. Some of you have heard a statement like this within marriage. The husband or the wife may say, "You always do this, and you never do that." What does this mean? Someone is keeping score. The Bible says never to do this. A record of wrongs is kept when someone adds up the offenses. But forgiveness does not do this.

What did Jesus mean when he said, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven..."? This is speaking of Christian churches, full of forgiveness, which are acting in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are acting how He told them to act. Then when they make a decision based upon His word, He honors it.

He does not honor it because the church plugs a formula in some mechanical way. But if it is done with the character and the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the body of forgiving believers makes a decision to discipline somebody who is not willing to repent, God honors it in heaven.

Many Christians use the verse about two or three agreeing on anything *out of context*. The verse has to do with church discipline, and forgiving your brother. It is right between the story Jesus told and Peter's question about how many

times he had to forgive. So when two or three gather together in His name, the Lord Jesus Christ is with them. This has to do with decisions of forgiving others who have sinned against you.

You can see the relationship between this and bitterness. Bitterness is really unforgiveness. It is saying that someone did something to me, and I am not going to forgive them. But of course bitterness does not think of itself as sin, it can only see the sin of the other person.

So in one sense, forgiveness is unilateral. In one sense, Jesus Christ forgave us all before we repented. It did not become active until we received it. But God was not up in heaven holding a grudge until we got around to repenting. He is not up there bitter until we repent. He has forgiveness in His heart before we appropriate it. There is unilateral forgiveness on God's part, and He requires unilateral forgiveness on our part toward anyone who ever sins against us. We think of what the other person did to us, or said to us, and really this whole issue has nothing to do with what the other person did or said.

When a Christian has forgiveness from the heart, he is concerned about the person who did the sinning against him. He is not concerned about himself. But we are like Peter. "Sure, Lord, I'll forgive him seven times but if he goes to eight, he's in real trouble."

But real forgiveness doesn't keep count. If you have a tendency to keep count within or without the family, it is very likely you are not forgiving. And Jesus said that His heavenly Father will treat each of us with a lack of forgiveness unless we forgive from the heart. *Forgive your brother from your heart.*

"Well, I do not have forgiveness in my heart." Then who needs forgiving?

The one who needs forgiving is the same one who has this unlove, this hatred, this bad attitude, this grudge, or whatever. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot have unforgiveness in your heart and rejoice in the Lord.

It is possible to have unforgiveness in your heart and still go to church and sing. But it is all a fake! The singing is false. You can make people sing but when people are clean you don't have to make them sing. But people will spontaneously sing from a full heart. Why? Because they have clean hearts.

There is a big difference between singing

because you are rejoicing in the Lord, and singing to get joy. Some Christians go to church every Sunday and sing to get joy. The joy ends when they quit singing because there is uncleanness in their heart.

We would all like to think that we are the good guy and that the other person has the problem. It might not be that. Just assume you are the one that has the problem of lack of forgiveness.

If a Christian has forgiveness in his heart, he will be rejoicing regardless of how wrong the other person was, or how greatly the other person sinned against him.

But how can you show forgiveness to someone when you have to be very firm because you don't believe in their lifestyle? It is not really that difficult. If you have forgiveness in your heart, they will know it regardless of how firm you are. They will know it, based upon your tone. People can tell when you love them. They can tell when you are being firm because you are bitter, and they can tell when you do it out of love. The only thing you have to be sure of is your attitude in the conversation. You do not have to worry how they will take it. The results are the Lord's. They may not accept it but they do know the difference.

Periodically, I have had to be very firm with people. One time, 35 years ago, a man had just gotten right with the Lord the previous March. He had been a Christian since his sophomore year, but in his senior year he really got right with the Lord. He asked to live with us in our home through the summer after graduation. We moved the kids around and moved him into the house. He went home first, and came back. He moved all his stuff into our house in June. My wife was putting the kids in bed and we were down in the living room. I asked him how things were going. He said, "Not so good."

"Is it the same problem you had before?"

He said, "Yes."

"Same girl?"

He said it was the same girl.

I asked if he remembered how wonderfully God forgave him in March?

He said, "It was wonderful. There was great joy and peace."

I said, "Well, He can do it again. Let's pray right now. You may repent and confess, and be restored."

He said, "No."

I said, "Well, it's true."

"Yeah, I know. I've seen it happen. I know He will do it again, but I am not quite ready."

I said, "Well, I do not think you understand. You do not really have an option. You know better. You have to be restored now."

He said, "No I will do it sometime but not now."

"Well, I think I will have to tell the church that you are living in sin."

"You would tell the church what I told you in confidence?"

"I did not know it was in confidence, and I didn't know what you were going to tell me, and I didn't know you were going to be unrepentant having told me. God tells me to take it to the church because we are not to have fellowship with you. We are not going to eat with you. The Bible tells us what to do with anyone who calls himself a brother who is a fornicator. The church is not very godly, so they will probably kick me out for gossip. Nevertheless, the Bible tells me to tell the church. I will also tell the Officer's Christian Union, and they will not bat an eye. They will remove you so fast it will not be funny."

He got angry.

I said that there was one other problem. "In I Corinthians 5, it says we are not to eat with you. We are just not allowed to keep company with immoral people who call themselves believers. If anybody calls himself a brother, and lives this way, we may not even eat with him. But you want me to disobey God because you are going to be unrepentant. You want me to eat with you, and have fellowship with you while you stay unrepentant. You have already moved your stuff in, so you can stay overnight. But if you're not right with the Lord by morning I want you out of this house before breakfast and I don't want you to speak to my wife or children."

He got very angry.

I said, "I love you very much. You know I love you very much. You may stay here all summer in fellowship but you do not eat breakfast here in the morning unless you are in fellowship."

He knew I loved him and that I wasn't holding a grudge against him. He knew the love was real. But if the same thing had been said with some sort of bitter malice, it would have been wrong.

He was right with God by breakfast and he

stayed there all summer. So forgiveness is not inconsistent with a godly discipline. If discipline exists, it does not mean that lack of forgiveness is there.

Spend time with God alone and clean house. If there is any unforgiveness toward anybody else, then forgive him from the heart. God is very quick to take you up on any serious business with Him. He is quick to forgive.

## Bitter Roots

*Sherry Allchin, Biblical Counseling Center*

*“See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” (Heb 12:15)*

Scripture commands us to get rid of bitterness (Eph 4:31), yet many do not even recognize the bitter root that troubles them, or know what to do with it when they do recognize it. Guilt (a legal status) and shame (the emotion that follows) are what we feel when we sin. We deal with guilt by confession and repentance (1Jn 1:9; Rom 8:1) and the feeling of shame disappears as we accept God’s forgiveness and see ourselves as redeemed (Eph 1).

Bitterness is what we feel when others sin against us. Bitterness focuses on the sin of others, and we can do nothing about the sin of another. Anger toward that person continues to grow and bitterness gets an ugly root in our lives!

Bitterness may begin with a real sin, or with perceived sins. God gave us a plan in Mt 18:15-35 to deal with someone’s sin against us and in Mt 5:23-24 to deal with our sin against another. It takes humility to go and ask forgiveness or to forgive another’s sin. But we must choose to forgive others just as God forgives us (Eph 4:31, 32).

How does bitterness spread? When a root is underground, it generally sends up a shoot and forms new plants wherever it moves. As new relationships are established, the patterns of dealing with problems established in the first relationship often pervade the new relationship, and with time, there is also bitterness toward that person as well. Bitter roots eventually produce bitter fruit! Many are then affected. The bitterness is kept alive by mulling over details in our minds, reviewing the hurt and building a case for our own self-righteousness. Hurts turn to resentment and then to rancid, rotten, destructive bitterness. It becomes obvious to those around through countenance, attitudes and responsiveness to others.

So what do we do with this bitterness? If we keep it inside, it makes us sick physically, spiritually, and emotionally. If we let it out as the world advocates, we just spread it around and make others sick! Neither is acceptable to God and shouldn’t be to us. God alone can give us the grace to overcome this root of bitterness, to cut it out.

James 3:14-16 warns us against harboring bitterness, allowing it to accumulate as time progresses. When we do, the door is opened to every evil practice (Eph. 4:26,27). The fruit of bitterness is self-destruction!

Naomi blamed God for her sorrow (Ru 1:13b, 20-21). She had become a bitter old woman in losing her husband and two sons to famine. One of her daughters-in-law chose to leave her. Only Ruth remained faithful, but in her bitterness Naomi didn’t even recognize the blessing of such a wonderful daughter-in-law—she described herself as “empty.” That is the way with bitterness. It keeps us from recognizing the good times. We think all is lost.

Jonah believed he had a right to be angry with God for saving Nineveh, a people he hated. He had expectations of God and God didn’t do what Jonah wanted Him to do. So Jonah got mad and sullen, accusing God of being unfair (Jo 4:9). Bitterness makes us forget Who is sovereign Lord, Who rules the universe in righteousness. We take rule into our own hands,

## A Prayer for Release from Resentment.

Peter Marshall was chaplain of the U.S. Senate from 1947-1949. He came to the United States from Scotland in 1927 and was later ordained as a Presbyterian minister. This prayer is from *The Prayers of Peter Marshall*:

Lord Jesus, Thou knowest me altogether. Thou knowest that I have steadily refused to forgive this one who has wronged me, yet have had the audacity to seek Thy forgiveness for my own wrongdoing.

The acids of bitterness and a vengeful spirit have threatened to eat away my peace. Yet I have stubbornly rationalized every unlovely motive. I have said, "I am clearly in the right. It is only human to dislike a few people. This one deserves no forgiveness." How well I know that neither have I ever deserved the forgiveness which Thou hast always freely granted me.

So, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee now for the grace to forgive this hurt. Even now, I am divided about it, only partially willing to release it. But Thou canst manage even my reluctance, my loitering feet. Take now my divided will and make it of one piece, wholly Thy will.

And Lord, I give to Thee this emotion of resentment which clings as if glued to my heart. Wrest it from me. Cleanse every petty thought. Make me sweet again.

I dare to ask that Thou wilt not only forgive me to the extent that I have forgiven \_\_\_\_\_, but that Thou wilt bless \_\_\_\_\_ to the degree that Thou hast blessed me. For these great mercies I thank Thee, in Thy name, who gave me the supreme example in forgiving even those who slew Thee. Amen.

## A STUDY GUIDE

### “How to be Free from Bitterness” by Jim Wilson

1. We are commanded to love others. How is bitterness an obstacle to obeying this command?
2. What about another’s sin against you can lead to bitterness?

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3. What are the world’s two “solutions” to bitterness? Are you guilty of either? If so, how has it affected you life?
4. What happens to bitterness over time?
5. Wilson offers a “good rule of thumb” for determining if you are bitter. What is it?
6. What about the nature of bitterness makes it so difficult to get rid of? What evidence does Wilson cite to substantiate this point?
7. Memorize Mark 7:20-23. What relationship does this have to the discussion of bitterness?
8. List below those you are bitter toward and what issues you are bitter about (*use initials or a code*). Then pray about each one until you can genuinely forgive from the heart (Mt 18:35). Begin to practice forgiveness in the way you think about or respond to that person. Give vengeance to God who alone can bring righteous justice. In time your feelings will match your decision to forgive, and the negative emotional energy will be gone as you practice forgiveness of others just as God has forgiven you (Eph 4:32).