

## **THE HEALING POWER OF FORGIVENESS**

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A few moments on the theme “The Healing Power of Forgiveness”. Our understanding of the cross of Jesus Christ is incomplete if it is only him whom we see on the cross. For the Christian understanding of the cross is that in Christ’s cross we also have been placed. We have been crucified with him. Our old nature is to die with him.

As I prayed about this service tonight the Holy Spirit has laid upon my heart a very specific word which will not apply perhaps to everyone here. But it is a very direct word to some. That God wants this night in your life to be unlike any other night. For in the time span of one brief service he is going to do a remarkable work of inner healing in your life and take something from you that is destroying you.

The Lord has spoken to me to take to you this evening about the theme of bitterness and being healed of bitterness in your life. All at once in one moment. This message began coming to me two Sundays ago on Sunday morning when during the choir presentation of exhalation, I felt a very direct word in my heart that that music was like the saturation of rain on the ground. Just as I had been unable to successfully pull the weeds up out of our front yard when it was dry, then the rain came and I was successfully able to extract the weeds root and all. But that is the context of worship. Since that time in these two weeks I have felt the Holy Spirit saying to me that this is the season and a time when God wants to pull up by the very root system of your life traces of bitterness so that you can go away from here this evening knowing that these are nailed to the cross and will trouble you no more.

One of the dimensions within unforgiveness the word in the Greek language came first of all to mean something pointed and sharp like an arrow. Something penetrating and painful.

I was reading a book recently that talked about primitive tribes people and how they had the skill to develop arrows that when they landed in the victim whether it be an animal or a human the arrow broke off and the arrow was tipped with a deadly poison made from herbs. Although the arrow broke off there was an inextricability to the point of the arrow that remained lodged within the system of the body. Once it had penetrated the skin it was only a matter of time until death set in.

That is the nature of bitterness. It is a poisoned arrow. A sharp point within the heart and the life that brings about spiritual and psychological death.

I want to share with you how bitterness gets into our life. Where bitterness is going to lead us if we do not deal with it. And how to be free from bitterness.

I’ve gone through the New Testament and looked at all the places where this word “bitter” occurs.

It’s striking first of all where it doesn’t occur. It never occurs of the Lord. When he’s in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his crucifixion he said this disciples, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” But he did not say, My soul is overwhelmed with bitterness. And he had a lot that he could have been bitter about. He could have been bitter that the system

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treated him the way it did. He could have been bitter that his own closest people had abandoned him and one betrayed him. He could have been bitter that he was not recognized by his own people. He could have been bitter about the ill treatment that lay ahead of him. About being laid in the dust of death, a totally just man. But instead of selecting the word “bitter” which would not describe him, he selected the word “sorrow”. There’s a great deal of difference between the two.

How does bitterness get into our life? There are three suggestions from the New Testament where the word occurs as to how it enters.

One way that bitterness gets into our life is that when life doesn’t turn out as we had expected it. And we’re disillusioned and we feel empty and we feel hurt and mad.

Peter felt that way in Matthew 26:75, Luke 22:62 life didn’t turn out the way he had expected. When he had denied the Lord three times the gospels say he went out and wept bitterly. It was a poison arrow in his soul. When he had begun to follow Jesus he had delusions of grandeur. The idea that he would sit with Jesus on some kind of an earthly throne. Now their relationship as far as he was concerned had ended up testing his own manhood and he had fallen far short of his own ideals and life had in no way turned out what he had wanted it to be.

Perhaps in your being here this evening that’s the way life is for you. You started out living life hoping that it would turn out one way and instead it has gone a darker turn. Bitterness gets into our life when we do not cope with that way that life has dealt us. For life does deal us terrible cards and rough tricks and awful events.

Another way bitterness gets into our life is when we let wrong and sinful motives come into our existence. Simon Magus, Acts 8:23, was this way. He had become a new Christian, then he discovered that he had been displaced in his standing of being the leader of the group. He wanted to buy the gift of giving the Holy Spirit with money. Peter had to tell him, “I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” Why was he bitter? Because his motives were wrong. Because there was sin in his life.

When that happens with us we often reach out and try to scrape goat and blame other people for what has happened to us. But we find that when we do not successfully deal with sin in our life and lay it in confession and repentance but live in it and exist in it that a bitterness comes into our heart. James 3:14 tells us “If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts do not boast about it or deny the truth.”

The third way the New Testament tells us that bitterness comes into our life is when domestic relations turn sour. Especially this word occurs in the marriage context. Colossians 3:19 “Husbands love your wives and do not be bitter with them.” King James says “harsh” but the word is “bitter”. The apostles, as well as the Lord, knew that all domestic relations as they grow and develop do not always yield happy conclusions. There are betrayals and infidelities and hurts and angry words and slammed doors and shut hearts. The danger is that we might become in dealing in our domestic relationships with our spouses or with our children or with our parents or brothers or sisters, we might become bitter.

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Bitterness can get into our life in one of these ways. Almost innocently, we don't even realize it's crept in. But then we look around one day and we realize it is there. If we let it stay there where is it going to lead us?

For one thing it's going to effect our speech, our communications. Romans 3:13-14 tells us that when we are without Christ and bitterness is in our life "our throats are an open grave, our tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on our lips, our mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." So instead of the language of praise and blessing and kindness and consideration the edge in our voice and the language which we speak is full of harshness and bitterness and condemnation and rebuke and argument and censor.

James asks the question, "Can sweet and bitter water pour out of the same fountain opening?" He's talking of the tongue being an agent of the cursing of bitterness. The word for "sweet" is the word "glucose" which we translate directly over into the English language as that which brings sustenance to life. It's antonym, it's opposite, is bitterness.

Our words are either helping to sustain other people or they're killing them. If we don't deal with bitterness we're going to wind up poisoning the people around us as well as poisoning our own heart with our language.

Not only that but bitterness is going to poison our emotional and our spiritual life. Ephesians 4:31 tells us "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice." Bitterness never comes alone. It brings with it a host of friends – rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with all forms of malice. Bitterness will also lead to spreading to others. It's like a highly contagious disease. That's why the writer of Hebrews, 12:15, tells us "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." The bitter root of trouble means that when we exist in community that others are going to become soured by our our view on life.

Ultimately bitterness will destroy our relationship with God. That's what Peter tells Simon Magus. "You have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right with God." And the writer of Hebrews tells us "Let no one miss the grace of God." How could we miss it? by being bitter.

How then do we break free from this awful poison of bitterness? The Lord certainly had been treated unfairly. How did he cope with bitterness? How did he keep it at the door?

Certainly he handled his most extreme betrayal in life with prayer. You'll find that you cannot handle bitterness at all in your life unless you make it a point to ask God to help you and to pray. Bitterness does not yield itself except when the soil is moistened with prayer. You must pray. You will never be free from your bitterness unless you bring that bitterness to God. If you are not bitter now, a life of prayer will keep you sweet. If you are bitter, the ground of your life needs to be broken by prayer.

Another thing Jesus did was he guarded his speech. You see this especially on the cross when he had every opportunity to lash out to all the people that had done him in. You would expect if he were a mortal sinner to see him clench his fist around the nail on the cross and say through teeth ground down, "I'll get you for this. I'll send you to hell for this." But there is no cursing from

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his lips. There's no threat of retaliation. There's no, "When I have power, I'm going to deal with you!" Jesus on the cross is crying out, "Father, forgive. Forgive!"

That's the key. You must forgive. Even if you're in the right and the other person is in the wrong and bitterness got there because you were done in by someone else. It's time to forgive. Bitterness like any other sin cannot be expectorated simply by our own efforts. We need the gift of God if we are to be healed of bitterness and be forgiven. There's some things we can't do for ourselves. No matter how many therapies we use, no matter how many counselors we see and how much psychoanalysis we go through and how much good intentions and resolutions we make in spite of it all we cannot be free because it's our human sinful nature that there are some things that only God can free us from.

And God will do it. We're gathered at communion this very evening. I want you to pray if you're bitter an honest prayer from the depths of your heart. If you've ever prayed an honest prayer to God I'd like it to be in this service. Say, "Oh, God you know my heart. This good Friday day is a day that finds me in life extremely bitter. Lord, heal me of that bitterness. Take it out by its root. Cleanse me. You died, Lord, to give me a strength I did not have. To give me a healing I could not get. Heal my life today and forgive me and help me to forgive."

I read the story of a person recently in a newspaper that was a victim of a holocaust. They were commenting on the recent American who had been sent over to stand trial in Israel. I stand in no judgment of this person's comment for had I been a victim of the holocaust perhaps I would make a similar comment. It was this: "If I were to die and you were to take out my heart and lick it you would die of poison."

How hard it is to forgive.

What if someone were to "lick" your heart? Would they die of poison?

Jesus' heart is pierced on the cross. Out flows not poison but blood and water. Water a sign of life and blood a sign of forgiveness. There's no bitterness as he lays down his life. He lays it down for us. His whole work of atonement and redemption would have been ruined had he let bitterness have any place in his life. Your whole life and my whole life will be ruined if we let bitterness dwell in us.

"There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood loose all their guilty stains." May we have the grace of God tonight to trust him on this day which marks his death that it might mark also a death to a side of our personality that we need to be done with.

Father, I pray for brothers and sisters, friends, family members we're all together in your family tonight. If we could deal with the things that wounded our life all by ourselves and by our own power there would have been no need for you to have gone to the cross, no need at all. But it's because we didn't have the strength to deal with sin, didn't have the strength to deal with death and we certainly didn't have the strength to deal with bitterness. It's for all those reasons you went to the cross, to lay down your life for us, to have our sin nailed to a tree. Father, I want to pray on behalf of us all this evening that where there is any bitterness in our life toward you, toward any other person, that you will forgive us and you will in these moments of communion heal us.

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As I prayed that prayer could I talk to all of you for a moment? I so much want in my heart and feel impressed of the Spirit that this not be another message where we get information and then just go forth without acting on it. I feel very keenly there are persons here this evening who need to say in their heart deeply, Pastor, you got the word of the Lord for my life tonight. I prayed and I'm going to ask God right now in this service to heal me of my bitterness." If you'll do that, if you'll honestly cry out to God, God will do it. He'll heal you from the inside out. Pulling up roots and all. You'll be a different person. This night will be the greatest blessing of surprise you ever had in your mind because you came to this service all set to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus and instead something in you that needed to die also died. His death won a victory in your life. Heavenly Father, free us from bitterness, forgive us. In Jesus' name. Amen.