



What is Bitterness?

Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"^b says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."^c

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This message is the fourth in our brief series on forgiveness. In contrast to the first three messages in this series—*what is forgiveness? what is repentance? and what is reconciliation?*, it seems that we would not have to even ask the question—*what is bitterness?* We all know what bitterness is like. It is an all-consuming emotion. The book of Hebrews defines it as a bitter root that grows up and defiles many. It is an emotional cancer that eats away at us from the inside out. And unlike most other emotions, it never ebbs and flows. We don't always feel joyful. We are not constantly at peace. Our love for others can come and go, but if we are bitter, not only does it not ebb and flow over time, it just continues to get stronger and stronger. And the really crazy part is that the truly bitter person is often not aware that they are bitter. They may not be happy but they don't realize the true root is bitterness. They may be chronically sick but they have not identified bitterness as the main culprit for their health problems. Yes, we all know what bitterness is. What we need to know is how to get rid of it.

First, here is an excellent summary from what we have covered in previous messages in chart form from the book, *Unpacking Forgiveness*.¹

Therapeutic Forgiveness	Biblical Forgiveness
Forgiveness is a feeling. It is ceasing to feel resentment or bitterness	Forgiveness is a commitment to pardon the offender.
Forgiveness is private or individual. It is primarily an activity that goes on within individual persons' hearts and minds.	Forgiveness is something happens between two parties.
Forgiveness is unconditional. Forgiveness should be granted regardless of whether or not the offender is repentant.	Biblical forgiveness is conditioned upon repentance.
Forgiveness is motivated primarily by self-interest. You should forgive others for their own sake.	Biblical forgiveness is motivated by love for neighbor and love for God. It is for God's glory and our joy.
A standard of justice is not critical—it is about how the person feels. According to this definition, you can legitimately choose to forgive someone who has not done anything wrong.	Justice is the basis for forgiveness You cannot legitimately forgive someone if he or she has not done anything wrong according to God's standards.
Forgiveness can happen apart from reconciliation.	Biblical forgiveness is inextricably connected with reconciliation.

Next, we'll jump right into the text of chapter twelve. This passage in the original language simply says "sincere love." There is no verb or command in the sentence. Every English translation has inserted the words "*let* love *be* sincere" or "love *must be* sincere." I think Paul left out these words because he was letting sincerity and genuineness be the defining measure of love. It's not that sincerity is one of the parts of the meaning of love but that love *is* sincerity; that without sincerity love ceases to exist.

The next phrase expands a bit more about what true love looks like—*hate what is evil*. This means that the essence of love includes a strong measure of hate. I have never thought of this before but sincere loves means that we have a terrible hatred for evil. This is not a wimpy kind of hate like if you said "I hate broccoli" or "I hate the Vikings." This is a loathing kind of hate. Two translations use the word abhor. It's the kind of hate that elicits strong emotions. It's the kind of hate that brings about righteous anger in a believer. But we must be sure that we understand the object of our hate—evil. Evil—or sin—is the antithesis of a holy and righteous God. If we love God then we must also hate evil. We can take that a step further—if we do not hate evil then we do not fully love God.

This has direct application to our bitterness toward others. Bitterness is hatred toward a person that has grown roots into our soul. The problem is that we almost always feel justified in our hatred toward them because they either did something evil against us or else we perceive that they did something evil. For the sake of argument, let's assume that we are dealing with a genuine and serious offense against you. Much of what stirs up anger and bitterness in us is a

result of petty offenses. Petty or not, that doesn't seem to stop us from storing up bitterness within. Someone has said that bitterness is like drinking poison and hoping someone else will die.

If the offense was serious, as we are assuming, then you have been truly wronged. They have committed genuine evil against you. But what happens at this point is that a pastor preaches a sermon or you read a book on forgiveness and you are told that you must forgive the person who has offended you and you must get rid of all bitterness toward them. Our response is classic—“You mean I have to not only forgive the person who hurt me so badly but I also have to get rid of all of my strong emotions? When we hear such well intentioned advice it feels like someone just told us to jump off of a cliff and fly like a bird. It feels as though others are telling us to pretend that the offense never happened at all. Just wish it away and all will be well. But as we have already seen, much of this advice is wrong headed. We have already learned that we should not unconditionally forgive another person unless they first seek forgiveness in a spirit of genuine repentance. If you missed this vital point, please go back and read the messages from November 7, 14 and 21.

Furthermore, we most certainly should *not* pretend that the offense never happened. This is where this verse is helpful—*hate what is evil*. If the person committed a serious offense against you, then they perpetrated evil against you. You don't have to like this, in fact, you should hate the evil. Now here is the point at which we must have laser accurate distinction between two things. We must hate the evil actions done by the person but without hating the person. Someone once said to me—“Oh yeah, you Christians have this thing about hating the sin but not the sinner, but that's not possible. You can't separate the two.” Not only is it possible but it is essential that we hate the evil done by the sinner without hating the sinner. If we do not hate the sin then we are not hating evil and if we are not hating evil we are not loving God. It does no good to downplay the sin against you. We simply cannot pretend that it did not happen or that it was not all that bad. Such a Pollyanna attitude doesn't do anyone any good.

It is wrong to hate the person who has offended you but it is right to hate the evil that they did. Moreover, this acknowledgement and hatred of the evil is the basis for their repentance and your forgiveness. If you downplay the evil or pretend that it never happened, then why should that person ever repent? Why do you need to offer forgiveness? Evil stirs up emotions in us and I don't think that God wants us to stuff those emotions and act like everything is OK. Hatred toward the evil done to you can give vent to your strong emotions. This does not mean that you need to be at a peak level of anger at all times but that some emotion directed at the evil and not the person is acceptable.

Therefore, know we know that love has a definite component of hatred within it—hatred toward evil. But this is just one part of love. The next part, Paul wrote, is to cling to the good. The word for cling has the meaning of clinging to that which is good with as much effort as hating that which is evil. The word for cling is used by Jesus when he quoted from Genesis to describe marriage. *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be **united** to his wife, and the two will become one flesh* (Matt 19:5). We are to cling to goodness and righteousness as a husband and wife cling to one another in the covenant of marriage.

But the problem is that rather than hating evil and clinging to good, our natural tendency is to love evil and stray from good. Thankfully, as Paul continues this section of chapter twelve, he gives specific ways to hate the evil and cling to the good. Verse ten is helpful but especially so in the ESV. *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit.* The first phrase gives a good word picture. We all know what a sloth looks like and how it moves. It is slow and lazy and sleeps most of the time. It is, after all, a sloth. Paul specifically commands us not to be slothful in our zeal. Zeal is a combination of emotions and effort. We usually use the more common word for zeal—passion. Most of us are passionate about one or more things. Our passion determines how we spend our money, our time and our efforts. If we are passionate about football, we put effort into watching football and we gain great enjoyment from doing so. But how many of us would describe our relationship with the Lord as “passionate”?

We are not to be slothful in our zeal—in our passion for the Lord—but rather we are to be “fervent in spirit.” The word fervent means to be boiling hot. It may sound a bit cliché, but what Paul is saying is that we are to be boiling hot for Jesus. We are to be on fire for Christ. But so that we are not left with empty clichés, Paul gives us several ways to apply this, starting with the last phrase in verse eleven. The NIV turns this into a participial phrase—serving the Lord—but it actually just says ‘serve the Lord.’ Most of this section of Scripture is a compilation of short phrases and words.

Serve the Lord

Be joyful in hope

Be patient in affliction,

Be faithful in prayer

Share with God’s people who are in need

Practice hospitality

I won’t take time to focus on each one of these but I do want to talk about the last one. Practice hospitality. Some of you absolutely love this command and others tend to hate it, but first let’s make sure we know what it means. Hospitality means a love for strangers; not a love for strange people. That is called the church. We are all a bunch of strange people who are called to love one another. ☺ Hospitality is a love for strangers—for those we do not know or know very well. It is not Christian fellowship. It is not about me having you over for a meal this week because you had me over for a meal last week. In the culture of the first century this was a little different because there was not a long list of hotels and fast food restaurants in every city. There was an occasional inn for travelers, but other than that, you were at the mercy of the townspeople. To this day, in the Jewish and Arab world there is a culture of hospitality that far exceeds ours. We have friends in Amman, Jordan and they have to be ready at a moment’s notice to practice hospitality to anyone who might knock on their door.

You might think that this does not apply to us since our culture is so different, but let me make a practical application for you. One very helpful way to apply this command is to have new people in church over to your house for a meal or cup of coffee. Such an act fits nicely with this command because someone who is new in our church is a type of stranger. If you are not very acquainted with someone, then they are a stranger to you. It also fits well because even though a new person does not need a place to stay or a meal to fill their bellies on a long journey, they do have a relational need. If the Lord is leading them to be a part of Grace Church then they have a

definite relational need to meet others and develop friendships. Therefore, the old-timers at Grace have a responsibility to the newer folks. Then, once they start to develop relationship, they will have a responsibility to others who are newer than they are. We also need to realize that this phrase is translated poorly. It does not merely say “practice hospitality” but rather “pursue hospitality” or strive toward hospitality.” It is the kind of pursuit that sets a goal and makes a plan to show care and concern for someone you don’t know very well.

So how does one proceed with hospitality? Well, the first thing you need to do is clean your house because you don’t want to be embarrassed when new people see your messy house. Then you need to have some good recipes. Then you have to go grocery shopping. Then you have to make this elaborate meal so that you can impress them with your amazing cooking. Is this hospitality? In some ways it certainly is and some people do all of these things remarkably well, but we must not think that this is the essence of hospitality. First of all, who said that you need to have a meal? Inviting someone over for a meal is just our cultural expression of the meaning of hospitality, but remember, hospitality means a care for strangers. Maybe the best way to care for this other person is to run an errand for them, or lend them a hand with a home project. Could you invite them over for a football game—would that count as hospitality? You will be pleased to know that it most certainly would count! There are many ways to pursue hospitality but I would like to challenge the old-timers among us to make a plan to make a relational connection with someone from the church you don’t know very well. If this person is not listed in the directory, chances are they are new. If you need some ideas, please talk to me. I know everyone is busy around Christmas and New Years but right now you could make a hospitality plan in the new year.

What does all of this have to do with overcoming bitterness? I will explain that after we look at the next section.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

If you are struggling to overcome bitterness, which part of this section stands out like a sore thumb? Verse fourteen, right? *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.* If you have been offended or hurt deeply by someone then your natural reaction will be to curse them. Some of you are thinking, “Now wait just a minute! I have never cursed anyone in my life. How can you say that I am prone to curse someone?” To answer this question, we have to think through what it means to curse another person. At Global Outreach we were introduced to one of the Haitian staff who took three years to become a Christian because his family had been so steeped in voodoo he was afraid to turn his back on voodoo. He was afraid that someone in his family would put a curse on him if he became a Christian. Now obviously, we don’t place curses on people like someone who practices voodoo, but we do sometimes wish bad things or even utter a “curse word” against them. Where do you think the term cursing got its name? We usually use the slang term cussing instead of cursing or call bad language ‘swearing’, but at its core a curse is nothing more than wishing ill of the one who has hurt you.

But once again some of you are thinking that you would never wish ill on anyone, no matter how much they have hurt you. It's possible that this is true for a minority of people, but we have to be honest with ourselves. When you get really angry at someone, what kind of crazy thoughts enter your mind? Most of them we would never want to say out loud and most of them you probably never verbalized even to yourself, but the point is that you are not thinking kind thoughts about them. You may not want them to choke and die at their next meal, but you certainly do not wish them well. And this is precisely Paul's point. His command is to bless them because blessing is the opposite of cursing.

It is almost certain that Paul was pulling from two of Jesus' teachings.

Love your enemies and pray for *those who persecute you*. Mt 5:44

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, *bless* those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Luke 6:27-28

Can you see how Paul put these two verses from the gospels together? When we seek to speak a blessing on someone it is impossible to speak—or think—a curse on them. But in addition to speaking blessings, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for our enemies.

Let me illustrate how this works. I am holding a glass jar with vegetable oil in it. How do I get the oil out of this jar? The obvious solution is to dump it upside down and pour it out. So let's assume that this jar of oil is glued to an immovable surface. Now how do you get the oil out? You could drink it through a straw and spit it out, but that's kinda gross. There is a simple solution. You take a glass of water and slowly pour it into the jar. Since oil is lighter than water, the water flowing into the jar will eventually start to spill the oil out of the top. In the same way, love, prayer and blessing will force bitterness out of the cup of your heart and soul. Bitterness cannot exist in a climate of love, prayer and blessing. It simply does not stand a chance.

Now understand that no one is saying that this is easy to do. Every prayer prayed for the one who hurt you is a supernatural act. Every act of love expressed toward your persecutor can only come from gospel power. Some bitterness is less rooted in your heart and will be driven out much more quickly but bitterness that has been allowed to grow over the months and years will almost certainly take longer. Deep-rooted bitterness reminds me of the story of the young boy in Mark 9 who was demon possessed. The story starts with the man's father speaking to Jesus.

¹⁷ *A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁹ He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer.*

I am not suggesting that bitterness is the same as demon possession, but if anger gives the devil a foothold, as Paul says in Ephesians, then what does bitterness do to a person? Bitterness brings much more than a foothold. It is safe to say that the devil has a stronghold on the bitter person and in some cases we could call it a stranglehold. Therefore, similar to the demon possessed boy in Mark 9, bitterness that is rooted into a person's heart can only come out by prayer, love and blessing of your persecutor. Like water flowing into this jar, it will eventually push out the oil of

bitterness in the heart. How much better to apply this to our lives long before the bitterness takes hold.

Notice that nowhere in this passage does it say to forgive those who persecute you and abuse you. We are commanded to pray for them, to bless them, to not seek revenge but not to forgive. As we have seen before, forgiveness requires the other person to come in repentance but letting go of your bitterness is your responsibility alone.

The final part of this passage is necessary to get rid of our bitterness and more importantly, prevent bitterness.

¹⁹ *Do not take revenge, my friends*

The topic of revenge is absolutely necessary to bring into the conversation about bitterness because bitter people will be thinking about revenge. A bitter person may never take revenge but they would probably like to if they could get away with it. This is a very familiar verse—do not take revenge, but why not? Are we not to take revenge because it revenge is not a nice thing to do? The reason is more striking than that.

Do not take revenge, my friends but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"^b says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.*

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."^c

²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Revenge is not our arena but this does not mean that the sin or abuse perpetrated against you will go unpunished. It is vital to know that God's justice will prevail in all things. God knows what that person did to you or in some cases, is still doing to you. The Lord knows all about the injustice and how this person has sinned against you and he wants us to know that justice will be done no matter what. If the person does not repent and turn to Christ for salvation, then the wrath of a holy and almighty God will remain on that person for all eternity. If that person does repent and trust Christ then justice will be served by the atoning blood of Christ on the cross. Either way, justice will be served. This is so important to understand because we might tend to think that since we are called to love, pray for and bless our persecutors, it feels like the offending person is just let off the hook. They have a "get out of jail free card" and we are left with all of the work of love and prayer. Justice will be done in every occasion but we need to know that this is not our area of responsibility. Leave room for the wrath of God.

Let me review the parts and process to overcoming bitterness.

1. Strong emotion and even hatred toward evil is necessary.
2. Evaluate whether or not your hatred is directed toward the person.
3. Be boiling hot for Jesus—fervent in spirit.
4. Love, prayer and blessing drives out bitterness (like water drives out oil)
5. Justice will be done, therefore leave room for God's wrath.

I want to leave you with an illustration of the 1994 Rwandan massacre. Starting on April 6 of 1994 over a period of 100 days, approximately 800,000 men, women and children were massacred in Rwanda. That works out to an average of nearly 10,000 per day. Most of these deaths were not committed by military or para-military groups but by one neighbor killing another neighbor with a machete. The death toll was 20% of their total population. To put this in perspective, if 20% of the population of the U.S. were murdered in 100 days, that would mean that 600,000 people would be killed every single day—the entire population of Vermont. By the end, 27 of the least populated states would be dead. Before the massacre, there was an active evangelical ministry among students with approximately 60 leaders. By the end of the massacre every leader was dead.² Ten years later there were only 2 student leaders and they held a prayer service for healing and reconciliation. Here is how one participant described it. “Tears of forgiveness flow, chains fall, reconciliation follows and fellowship is sealed in the blood of Jesus.”

If believers in Rwanda can work through such tribal conflict and terrible genocide through the blood of Christ, do we have any right to hold onto our bitterness, especially when the vast majority of it is miniscule in comparison?

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^b Deut. 32:35

^c Prov. 25:21,22

¹ Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, © 2010, p. 65.

^b Deut. 32:35

^c Prov. 25:21,22

² <http://www.kairosjournal.org/document.aspx?QuadrantID=4&DocumentID=5605&L=1&CategoryID=10&TopicID=47>