

Destroying Bitterness and Anger before They Destroy You

Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 4:31-32

June 21, 2015

Greg L. Price

You have likely heard of the heinous slaughter of nine black Americans that were attending a prayer meeting in Charleston, South Carolina this past Wednesday evening. A young man entered that prayer meeting, sat down and observed for about an hour, even stating to police investigators that he nearly changed his mind about his savage plot because the people were so friendly to him. From news reports that cited the testimony of eye witnesses as well as the testimony of the 21 year old murderer himself, this awful violence was racially motivated (he wanted to start a racial war). Bitterness and anger had taken root in this young man's heart and looked for an outlet through his vicious actions.

But what a contrast there was in the response of family members of those murdered who appeared in court and wept over the loss of their loved ones while expressing to the face of this young man their willingness to forgive him. I don't know the true spiritual condition of these family members who spoke in court, but they were not following the race-baiters who want to sow the seeds of bitterness and anger in promoting racial riots and violence. They did not want the same root of bitterness that destroyed that young man to grow and to eat them up alive (or to consume others). We should be praying for these families that God would draw them unto Himself through faith in Jesus Christ, comfort them, and use them in a dynamic way to promote both God's justice in this matter, but also to promote God's grace in subduing that root of bitterness and the anger that flows from it as a testimony to the power of the resurrected Christ to overcome sin in our lives.

What about you who sit and listen to God's Word preached today? What

about the bitterness and anger that has taken root in your life, that is destroying you from the inside out (Hebrews 12:15)? Perhaps some of you are living with a life-long bitterness that goes back to childhood. Perhaps some of you are living with a bitterness that is more recent. Whatever the case, bitterness and the anger that flows from it are sapping the very life from you. Instead of the fruit of the Spirit growing in your life, the ever-spreading root of bitterness is growing in your life. How do you fortify the wall of godly self-control in holding at bay bitterness and anger against those who have betrayed you, those who have lied to you and deceived you, those who have abused you and misused you, those who have attacked you, slandered you, robbed you, and even slain your loved ones? Dear ones, the life of the resurrected Christ is infinitely more powerful than any bitterness and anger that have taken root in your life.

The main points for our sermon this Lord's Day are the following: (1) Identifying the Root of Bitterness and Anger in Your Life (Ephesians 4:31); (2) Replacing the Root of Bitterness and Anger with the Forgiveness of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:32).

I. Identifying the Root of Bitterness and Anger in Your Life (Ephesians 4:31).

A. The Apostle Paul laid the theological foundation in the first three chapters of the Letter to the Ephesians, and now proceeds to apply the doctrine to the lives of Christians. In chapters 1-3, Paul teaches who we as Christians are in Christ, and then in chapters 4-6, Paul teaches how we as Christians are to live in a sinful world.

1. We are to live in such a way that we as Christians can be distinguished from the worldly with whom we work, go to school, and live. If there is little or no difference between the speech, conduct, work,

goals, dreams, and worldview of the Christian from those of the world, we may have a profession of faith in Christ, but we have denied the power of God working in our lives (2 Timothy 3:5).

2. Paul writes that a Christian is one who puts off the old sinful life that characterized our former worldly self (Ephesians 4:22) and rather puts on the new man created in Christ Jesus for good works (Ephesians 4:24). This is generally how we as Christians are different from our previous unconverted life and different from our nonchristian neighbors. When Christ died, our old man legally died with Him. When Christ was raised from the dead, our new man legally was raised with Him. It is like a penniless orphan being legally adopted into the household of the King and being given legally the name of the King. Paul says to us, “Don’t continue to live like the penniless orphan, live in your daily life as the legally adopted child of the King of Kings, who gives you everything you need to live your new life in Christ.

3. But specifically, Paul then notes in the next few verses what we as Christians are to put off (like dirty filthy rags) and what we are to put on (like the royal garments of a child of the King).

a. We are to put off all lying and deception and rather to put on speaking the truth to one another (Ephesians 4:25).

b. We are to put off self-centered anger and rather to put on God-centered anger over our own sin and the sin of others against our King and His royal commandments (Ephesians 4:26).

c. We are to put off stealing and cheating and rather to put on honest work and selfless giving to the needs of others (Ephesians 4:28).

d. We are to put off all corrupt, profane, and impure speech, and rather to put on words that encourage others and minister God’s grace to others (Ephesians 4:29). Remember, you can tell what is in your heart by what proceeds from your mouth (“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” Matthew 12:34).

e. Finally, we are to put off all bitterness and wrath toward others, and rather to put on kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness (Ephesians 4:31-32).

B. Let's focus now our attention more closely on the words of our text in Ephesians 4:31. The sins listed here by Paul are insidious enemies to the spiritual growth of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking, and malice. They are all related, but yet distinguishable from one another. They are all to be "put away" (or destroyed). If bitterness breaks through the wall of godly self-control, you can count on these sins to follow right behind bitterness.

C. **What is bitterness?**

1. This Greek word (*pikria*) comes from a root which means to prick or to cut. It is a resentment that cuts and pricks to the very heart of a person. It is an inner heartache and pain that responds to one who is perceived or who actually did mistreat, betray, deceive, slander, abuse, was angry, was violent, or was unjust with you. It is like a smoldering flame that lies beneath the surface ready to ignite into an angry outburst of words and actions. It is called "a root of bitterness" in Hebrews 12:15, for like a root it is growing beneath the surface, like a root it is spreading the more that it is fed, and like a root it is sapping you of good fruit in your life that might otherwise be produced because your strength is going to the root of bitterness instead of to the fruit of the Spirit. It has been said that bitterness is the resentful spirit that refuses reconciliation. Bitterness will not forgive and it will not be reconciled to the offender even when there is evidence of a genuine repentance on the part of the offender. Such bitterness will make a life miserable and will make one miserable to those around him/her. Such bitterness will often be directed toward God as well, spewing out invectives against His justice, His faithfulness, His love, goodness, and care.

2. **How does bitterness break through the wall of godly self-control?**

a. When you perceive you have been mistreated or wronged (**whether** betrayed by your husband or wife, **whether** passed over by your boss for a promotion you deserved, **whether** abused as a child or as an adult, **whether** embarrassed or made fun of in public, **whether** unjustly attacked in your name or for a biblical conviction, **whether** rejected by peers because you are a “narrow-minded Christian”, or **whether** due to the irresponsibility of someone [a drunk driver] you suffered the loss of a loved one or the loss of some ability yourself), you believe you are justified and warranted in holding a grudge against the one who has wronged you. You judge you are vindicated in doing so—you have a right to be bitter and resentment. But dear ones, we never have the right to have a vindictive resentment and bitterness against any one—God never gave us such a so-called right. In fact, God calls it sin.

b. When you see no remorse, no repentance, and no sorrow for what someone has done to you. In fact, he/she has escaped all human accountability (has gotten away with it). The only punishment then may be your resentment toward that person. But dear ones, bitterness is not the other person’s problem, it is your problem. You may have been wronged (seriously wronged), and yet you are responsible for how you respond to that sinful, wicked mistreatment of yourself. You can either respond with a self-centered bitterness that merely focuses on how that person has hurt you, or you can respond with a Christ-centered self-control (and a readiness to forgive the undeserving as we shall see).

c. Ungodly bitterness will always break through the wall of godly self-control when we see the sin committed against us, but are blinded to our own sin in hating, despising, wanting to get even, and in focusing upon our hurt rather than upon glorifying God in our pain.

3. **How might you recognize this enemy that seeks to breach the wall of godly self-control or that has already breached the wall of**

godly self-control in your life?

a. First, you live in the past over the way you were mistreated by someone or wronged by someone, rather than learning from the past in order that you might live wisely in the present.

b. Second, you remember the details of what was done to you and find yourself rehearsing those details often. And your mere memory of the details will not end there, but will become a means of drawing others into that web of bitterness (and will defile “many” according to Hebrews 12:15).

c. Third, you become very angry (with a vindictive anger) when you are reminded of that situation or of the offender. And our bitterness does not affect the offender at all, but rather the offender continues to control you through your bitterness and misery.

d. Fourth, you may even have certain health consequences like high blood pressure and rapid beating of the heart when you reflect upon how you were mistreated. And if this happens often enough, it will lead to more severe health issues (insomnia, problems with eating, ulcers, problems with work, problems with concentration etc.).

4. What will unrepentant bitterness cost you?

a. Communion with Christ and answered prayer.

b. Growth in the fruit of the Spirit.

c. Health (spiritual, emotional, and physical).

d. Relationships (in marriage, family, and friendships).

e. Once it has been nursed and protected and allowed to take root in your heart, it will not be easily uprooted (like every other sin that we ignore, tolerate, and protect). Paul does not say to put away “some bitterness”, but rather to put away (destroy) “all bitterness”.

D. The other enemies that will follow bitterness in seeking to breach the wall of godly self-control are: wrath (*thumos*), anger (*orge*),

and clamour (*krauge*).

1. In Ephesians 5:26, Paul had stated, “Be ye angry and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath.” Here Paul distinguishes between a righteous and God-centered anger and a wicked and self-centered anger; for there is an anger that the Christian may have and yet not sin in having it; but there is also an anger that the Christian may have and which is sinful—this anger is to be “put away” before we lay our heads down upon our pillow to fall asleep (how marriages would be so greatly benefitted if only couples obeyed that single principle of being reconciled to one another by the end of the day, and not carrying over that anger into the next day, when another disagreement arises). We are called to keep short accounts in order that bitterness and anger do not build layer upon layer to the heights of heaven itself. Dear ones, some decisions we may sleep on, but sinful anger is not something to sleep on.

2. **How are righteous anger and sinful anger distinguished?**

a. First, righteous anger has chiefly the glory of God in view, whereas sinful anger has chiefly the offense committed against me or another in view. Righteous anger is a God-centered anger (concerned first with the honor of God); sinful anger is a man-centered anger (concerned first with the honor of man). In other words, righteous anger is chiefly over sin committed against God and His holy commandments (beginning with our own sin). Sinful anger is chiefly over the offense committed against me (Psalm 51:4). Righteous anger arises because we are in union and communion with God, and therefore attacks against the Lord are attacks against us (just like we should feel when our spouse or children are unjustly attacked).

b. Second, righteous anger is under the control of the Holy Spirit, whereas sinful anger is out of control (whether beneath or above the surface).

c. Third, righteous anger pleads for God’s mercy to be shown to sinners that they might repent of their sin and be granted the

forgiveness of God, whereas sinful anger is personally vindictive and seeks to get even with others (their repentance and forgiveness is of no concern).

3. Look with me briefly at these individual words for sinful anger (Ephesians 4:31).

a. “Wrath” (*thumos*). This is the boiling type of anger. This is the red-hot type of anger that just snaps at someone or in some situation. It is an outburst. Someone cuts in front of you in traffic and you are calling them names and letting them have it with your horn and other unseemly gestures.

b. “Anger” (*orge*). This type of anger is not so much an outburst, but an anger lasting longer. It is an on-going irritability toward someone or something. *Thumos* arises suddenly and may subside more quickly, whereas *orge* arises more slowly and continues longer.

c. “Clamour” (*krauge*). This is the type of anger that leads to tumult and riots (as we have seen in cities of our own country).

d. Now these three examples of sinful anger are joined to bitterness, for bitterness is that which prepares the way for each of these expressions of sinful anger. Dig out the root of bitterness.

e. Paul adds as well that “evil speaking” (slander, lying, sinful criticism, gossip, etc.) and “malice” (and any type of speaking that has an evil design) are also to be put away (and destroyed) in the life of the Christian.

II. Replacing the Root of Bitterness and Anger with the Forgiveness of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:32).

A. If the wall of godly self-control is to stand against the enemies of bitterness and anger (in all of their forms), that wall must be fortified with kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness. Otherwise, you can be sure that you will be overcome by bitterness and anger. Consider

these three graces that Christ has already purchased for you to put and to fortify the wall of godly self-control. You are to put off the filthy garments of bitterness and anger and to put on the royal garments of kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness.

1. “Be ye kind one to another”. This is the fruit of the Spirit that we already discussed: the fruit of gentleness/kindness (Galatians 5:22). Kindness is the fruit of a mild and gracious heart, not a severe and harsh heart that only cares about the truth, but a heart that speaks the truth in love in order to win a brother rather than simply to win an argument or debate, a heart that seeks if at all possible the more gentle approach over the more harsh approach in correcting others.

2. “Tenderhearted”. Although tenderheartedness is not specifically mentioned in the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, it is a fruit purchased for us by Christ and given to us by the Holy Spirit as Christians. Rather than seething in bitterness and anger (put that off) and rather than having a hard heart (put that off), and rather put on a tender heart toward the offender, which is a heart of mercy. Grace is God giving us what we do not deserve—salvation. Mercy is not giving us what we do deserve—hell. A tender heart (which is formed from a Greek word that is translated as mercy) does not give the offender your full fury and wrath, but rather opens the door to forgiveness.

3. “Forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” This is the third means of fortifying the wall of godly self-control against the onslaught of bitterness and anger.

a. Biblically, forgiveness is a promise not to hold a sin or offense against the offender any longer. It is to cast the sin of another behind you and to remember that sin against the offender no more, so that there might be reconciliation (“for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” Jeremiah 31:34). That incredibly describes the forgiveness of God toward us who have sinned against Him in so many ways that they cannot even be numbered (Micah 7:19).

(1) Divine forgiveness is only possible due to the mercy and grace of our God. Dear ones, divine justice demands a just punishment—just as human justice demands a just punishment (Romans 6:23). And that is precisely why Christ was sent into this world as the God-Man—to pay the punishment which sinners deserved (sinners chosen in Christ Jesus before the world began).

(2) On and only on the basis of that perfect sacrifice and payment by Jesus Christ is there the forgiveness of sin by God as the absolutely righteous Judge of all the earth. That divine forgiveness costs the believing sinner nothing (we cannot earn it or deserve it). It is free because Christ suffered death and hell in our place and paid for the guilt and punishment of all our sins on the cross. That, dear ones, is the gospel (good news) that I preach unto you.

b. If you would defend your hearts against sinful bitterness and anger, and if you would walk in this world as a child of God, you too must forgive one another, “even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” When we refuse to forgive those who have sinned against us and have repented of their sin, we give forth reason to doubt whether we have been forgiven by the Lord and whether we understand the forgiveness of God toward undeserving, unworthy sinners like you and me (Psalm 86:5; Luke 17:3-4). How can we refuse to forgive (or at least be ready to forgive), when we have been forgiven so much (The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Matthew 18:23-35)?

B. How do we fortify the wall of self-control?

1. Recognize bitterness and anger for what it is—sin. And don’t blame others for your bitterness and anger. It is your sin. Others may have sinned against you, but it is you that is bitter and angry.

2. Repent of and seek forgiveness for bitterness and anger as an offense against God and your fellow man.

3. Build the wall of self-control with kindness,

tenderheartedness, and forgiveness.

4. You don't have to become bitter and angry against God or man over what others have done to you (consider Joseph). God brings the attacks of others against us that we might grow in the fruit of self-control and learn by experience the forgiveness of Christ (the gospel) in our lives. The sweetening of the bitter waters of Marah (Exodus 15) is a beautiful picture of the sweetening of our bitter hearts by the cross of Jesus Christ.

Copyright 2015 Greg L. Price. Distributed by Still Waters Revival Books (<http://www.puritandownloads.com>) by permission of the author, Greg L. Price. More free online written Reformation resources by Greg Price (John Calvin, John Knox, Samuel Rutherford, et al.) are at <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/newslett.htm> and more free audio (MP3) Reformation resources by Greg Price (and many other Puritans, Covenanters, and Reformers) are at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/go/699> or at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/swrb>.