

March 25th 2012 "Dealing With Bitterness" Romans 12:9-21

Many of us would know Chevy Chase as the actor famous for his comic role in such movies as the Three Amigos, the National Lampoon Vacation films and several others. He comes across as a very funny man. Yet in a biography about him we are told that for many years he struggled with immense bitterness. When he was a child his mother abused him repeatedly. She locked him in a closet for hours at a time and would wake him up in the night to slap him in the face. Fifty years later, Chase has said he still cannot shake off the memories of what his mother did, even after her death.

Bitterness over a wrong or wrongs committed against us can be just like that. They get into our heads and stay there like a deadly but dormant virus, ready to break out and destroy or harm at the slightest provocation.

We see it early in the Bible in the story of Cain and Abel. Abel's offering was accepted but Cain's didn't make the grade and he became angry and his face was downcast. Visual signs of the bitterness eating away at him. And in Gen 4:6-7 we read:-

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

That sin had many faces, but one of them was bitterness....a very dangerous sin. It's a sin that can even survive after forgiveness, for there are instances when we have forgiven someone, but the bitterness we feel against them remains and raises its ugly head whenever we hear about that person or by chance meet them.

As a believer it can steal from us the joy of the Lord and cause us to act in a way that displeases Him. The psalmist in Psalm 73 talks about the way bitterness of spirit made him act before God. Ps 73:21-22

***²¹ When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
²² I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.***

The idea of a brute beast suggests to me a stubborn spirit. A refusal to let go of the wrong thoughts or attitudes we have against another, even if it affects our walk and ministry before God.

I recall as a Pastor of a church a situation between two senior church members at a church meeting. Years before they had had a disagreement and both were still bitter about it. Unfortunately they shared an expertise in a certain area and were called to make a joint decision about an issue that was facing the church, and one of them stood up at that church meeting and said that because they could not agree on that matter they were bringing two reports and suggestions to the meeting and not one, and everyone there knew why that was so. And I had to remind them both at that meeting that this was God's work they were doing and that they must do it in God's way. And then I sent them out of there and told them to come back in when they could put personal issues aside and come back with a united voice, which eventually they did, and what's more, they started to repair their relationship from that time on.

You would know this morning if you suffer such bitterness in your heart toward another. In fact you may well believe that because you were the wronged person and have not retaliated against them in a way similar to how they treated you, then you are justified in your bitterness. Yet that is not what the Bible says. It encourages you to put away all bitterness because bitterness is a sin. Ephesians 4:31-32 says:

³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Bitterness is not in good company here, is it? Listed along with rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice. The alternative suggested for the believer is to be like God in our forgiving of others. We can't imagine God forgiving us in Christ yet holding on to a bitter spirit. We are also to show forth kindness and compassion instead of malice or evil.

This is the same instruction that we find in Romans 12. Look again at verses 18-21:

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," 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."***

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

This is all about putting aside your desire to make the offender pay in some way for the wrong they have committed and the damage they have caused, especially if they have shown no remorse. And too often for believers such pay back is not a physical act but an attitude. An attitude of bitterness, which hurts them and their Christian experience much more than it affects the other person. As Dale Carnegie once said:

"Wouldn't our enemies rub their hands with glee if they knew that our hate for them was exhausting us, making us tired and nervous, ruining our looks, giving us heart trouble, and probably shortening our lives?"

You being bitter will not bring about vengeance, so let God deal with that. Leave any vengeance to Him. Instead show kindness to your enemy, allowing God to work in their heart, and maybe He will bring about their repentance in His time and in His way.

Dealing with bitter thoughts is never going to be easy because it is a spiritual battle, and the evil one delights to keep us bitter. As in the story of Cain the devil is always crouching at the door of your heart wanting to sow the seeds of bitterness into your mind

So how do we combat bitterness?

Well first we need to accept that defeating bitterness in us is a spiritual battle. If someone has really wronged you and broken your trust don't expect that your forgiving them will always cancel out all bitter thoughts instantly. Sometimes it does, but other times you can't seem to get rid of that bitterness.

If you were to analyse yourself you would find that it's not so much from your heart that the thoughts come but from your mind, because you are involved in spiritual warfare. The devil wants you to believe that you are a failure as a Christian because of such bitter thoughts, yet he is the one who

is feeding them. You need to pray and study God's Word until that particular battle is won. C.S. Lewis in his book, 'Letters To Malcolm' describes how long it took him to win one mental battle. He wrote, "Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years." The bitterness had finally departed.

Second, overcoming the battle of bitterness is part of the process of Sanctification. Sanctification is a technical term that simply means, becoming more like Christ. The day you became a Christian a goal was set in your heart by the Holy Spirit and that was to change you little by little until you became in your thoughts and actions, just like Jesus.

Can you imagine Jesus having a spirit of bitterness towards Judas who betrayed Him, Peter who denied Him, or those who crucified Him? Can you imagine Jesus saying, I forgive you but I never want to have anything to do with you ever again? I don't intend ever again to go out of my way to be loving, kind, helpful to you?

Whereas it is natural in sinful man to want to avenge and to hold on to bitterness, in a person who belongs to Christ it is something that the Holy Spirit desires to gradually change.

Third, always remember that you are not ultimately the victim. That is the promise of God to you if you belong to Him and by faith have become part of His family. He does not promise that you will never suffer from the wrongdoings of others against you. At times you may well be victimized to a greater or lesser degree. But as Paul says in Romans chapter 8, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us".

Consider the story found in Genesis of Joseph. He was despised by his brothers to the point where they beat him up and then sold him into slavery. As a slave he was unjustly accused of rape and then abandoned by his master whom he had served so faithfully and whom he trusted. He spent extra time in prison because of a broken promise and then finally was elevated by the grace of God to a high position in the land of Egypt. It was there he met his brothers again, and now they are dependent upon his favour and kindness for their very lives. And they are scared. After their father dies they expect Joseph to retaliate against them out of his bitterness. But what Joseph says to them is a real eye opener for them and for us. For he turns to

them in their fear and comforts them by saying, I bear no grudge against you. How could I. "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

If we truly believe that God is in charge of our lives, which is what the Bible says, then we know that God will cause even the bad things that others do to us to work to our advantage in Christ. Romans 8:28 says(JB Phillips):-

Moreover we know that to those who love God, who are called according to his plan, everything that happens fits into a pattern for good.

We are not the ultimate victims; those who do wrong against us are, for unless they receive God's forgiveness they stand before Him accused of sin against one of His children.

Such should motivate us to lay aside any bitterness in us this morning, for it is a weapon of the evil one. It does not belong in the armoury of the Christians. Instead we need to pray for and be kind and considerate to any we have previously been bitter towards. Remembering always the words spoken by Jesus during that Sermon from the mount in Matthew 5:43-47

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.