

BITTERNESS - HIGHLY CONTAGIOUS

Romans 3:14 says, "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." Let me begin by saying that by personal experience I am far more familiar with the subject than I ought to be. It seems that every time I study this subject, God is trying to flush some bitterness out of my life.

The first thing we know about bitterness is that it is a problem someone else has. The second thing is that it is a "problem" that we SOMETIMES have. Or perhaps it is an attitude or a trial that we are going through, or a difficulty that we struggle with. We think that it is our right after the way we have been treated. But let me say that as long as you call it a problem, an attitude, a trial, a difficulty, a solution or your right, you will never get any deliverance from it. It is only when you call it sin that you can ever get free, for God calls it a sin.

In my family we like to think that we have no problem with bitterness. It is our family trait to have long memories, and to recognize that God is sovereign, but that He might someday permit us to be a tool of responsibility to care for those that need to be

corrected. In the meantime, we are going to think of how God could give us a chance to "fix their wagon". I don't care what you want to call your bitterness, but God only has one word for it.

Let me say that bitterness for the Christian is a sin that is too often experienced and too rarely conquered. The passage in Romans 3 surrounding this verse is speaking of a lost man - man in his natural state apart from the Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the marks of a lost person. That is what frightens me, as I periodically find the evidence of it in my life.

I look at the verse again and find that it says, "Whose mouth is FULL of cursing and bitterness." The mark of the lost is that their mouth is FULL of bitterness. But as a Christian I must be honest in acknowledging that sometimes it is in my heart and too often it gets into at least a part of my mouth. It is enough to make me examine.

The lost person has a mouth full of bitterness. It taints what he says. The words have to pass through the mouth and they are affected by the bitterness. The words come out colored and with a little cut on the edge. Or perhaps they come out with a little bit of criticism. Maybe they come out with just a

taste of sarcasm or a bit of harshness. Some people can tell you they love you and it grates like sandpaper. It has a feel that somewhere some bitterness tainted it before it reached you.

Brethren, we have a lot of people in our churches whose problem is not that they have trouble with bitterness from time to time, but they, by God's definition, have a mouth FULL of bitterness. All they know is the natural man. They know nothing of grace. You can hear nothing of it in their speech. There is never any joy, peace or love. There is never any kindness, or forgiveness. It is always with a critical, cutting bitterness. There is that touch and flavor no matter how sweetly they try to speak. It is a mark of a lost person. Sad to say, some of us talk more like the lost than we would like to think.

I began to study this matter of bitterness because it is the sort of word that is hard to get a handle on. I tried to find some illustrations that would be proper and suitable to the Scriptures, so I could better be able to understand it and deal with it in my life and maybe help some others. I found to my amazement that God had selected some illustrations or word pictures to help. God doesn't always do this with every word. But

when it came to bitterness God knew that we would struggle so much to avoid recognizing it that He gave us some words that would help us know what it really means.

In Acts chapter 8 we have the story of Philip who was under persecution and left Jerusalem and went down to Samaria. He interrupted Simon the sorcerer's ministry there and people began to come to the Lord. Simon lost his crowd, so he decided he should join them, since he couldn't beat them. He looked pretty good. Philip didn't seem to understand what was happening, but when Peter came Simon exposed himself, and Peter began to deal with him. Acts 8:22-23a says, "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness...."

This verse says that bitterness is like gall. Some of you who have been raised in the country know a little about the gall bladder. You know that when you are butchering if the gall bladder gets cut and the gall gets on some of the meat it can ruin it. Some of you have never been around that type of project, but you have probably had the flu. You found that you had disposed of everything you had eaten for

longer than you remembered eating. All that was left was the green stuff and a bitter taste in your mouth. The gall had started coming up.

Many people say they look at the world through rose-colored glasses, but bitter people look at it through green-tinted ones. "Gall of bitterness". It is that which cuts the acids and the grease in the digestive system. A little of it goes a long way.

Simon had the gall of bitterness. It was down inside him and didn't show up at first. Philip didn't see it, and the church didn't see it either. He was able to go along looking all right, but down inside there was a problem stirring. It was the gall of bitterness working in him. How did Peter discover it? There were several earmarks of it. Any of these will give you some idea of bitterness. In this man's case it had produced a counterfeit conversion. He was bitter over losing his popularity and he thought that if he became a Christian he could re-gain a little status before man. There are some people who will do most anything to gain stature in the eyes of people. They will try to put on a religious experience, but the problem is that inside they have bitterness.

Not only did Simon have that problem, but there was a second problem. Verse 13 says,

“Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.” He believed, but it also says he wondered. When a person first gets saved, he believes God can do anything. But from the very beginning, Simon couldn't understand God's working because all he had known was sorcery. This surpassed it and he just stood back and marvelled at it.

Some people come to me trying to impress me, and say that they marvel at what is happening in our church. I begin praying for them because I know they have trouble. If they knew the God I know, they would wonder why more wasn't going on. But bitterness will make you wonder how God can bless anyone.

Simon was also filled with envy and greed and wanted to get the power Peter had. He thought perhaps he could buy it, for if he could get that power then HE could be great again. This was a power that he had never had as a sorcerer. Think of the prestige he would have again if he could just be like a preacher. Then he would be good and spiritual in everyone's eyes.

There are those who think they are getting a call to preach, but it is really a desire

for prestige because they have some bitterness working on the inside. It isn't long before it becomes evident that God didn't call them to preach, they only thought that God had. They were trying to find how they could be like the pastor and have people listen to them and love and follow them. It is that bitterness at work inside. They don't know the agony that a pastor goes through, -- they only see the other. Bitterness will make you misunderstand a whole lot of things about God and His nature, His actions and blessings, His methods of working and His men.

Let's look at a second picture found in Hebrews 12:14-17 where it reads, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."

In verse 15 God lists three areas that we, as Christians, are to watch. Number one is

“lest any man fail of the grace of God”. It must be an awful thing to fail of the grace of God. Number two is “lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled”. Number three is “lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears”. He cried and couldn’t repent. And he tried and he couldn’t repent. He couldn’t get the blessing. Be careful that you don’t become profane -- that is common-like. Don’t be a fornicator. Don’t sell your birthright. Guard against these things.

Right in between failing of the grace of God and being like Esau, God puts bitterness. He says it is not something you can deal with when it comes along, but rather it is something you have to watch for before it arrives. Any time your aren’t watching for bitterness you are in disobedience to this passage of Scripture. You must watch diligently, carefully, constantly with effort, or bitterness will consume you without your trying. Fact is, I have never known a person who tried to be bitter, but that didn’t keep them from getting

bitter. All they had to do was quit guarding against it and it came.

We are given a word picture here - "root of bitterness". I know a little bit about roots. I remember that as a boy my dad sent me to the garden to get rid of the weeds. He gave me a hoe and I discovered to my amazement that I could make greater progress by just chopping the tops of the weeds off than by digging them out in the old-fashioned way like Dad did. It looked mighty good. I chopped the soil like he did, which covered over those roots. But it wasn't long before he sent me back out because the weeds had come back. I chopped them off again, but hadn't gotten to the root. If you know anything about chopping them off at ground level you will know the root gets bigger and stronger and it gets harder the longer you wait to actually dig the root out.

God says bitterness is like a root. There is a great difference between the root, the stalk, the leaves and the fruit of the plant. Oftentimes we see the fruit in people's lives and don't understand how it got there, but it may be that there is a root of bitterness hidden out of our view. We may have seen leaves and stalks and tried to get rid of that awful fruit. Or maybe we tried to cut off the bad leaves and the stalks, but

they kept coming back in our life. The reason is we have never gotten to the bitterness that is the root of the whole matter.

The root doesn't look like the stalk. We can see the stalk and the beautiful green leaves. I have wondered about some plants. I have told my wife that we ought to plant a flower bed full of dandelions. So far she has not been in favor of it. You would never have to worry about weeding them, because dandelions will choke out the weeds. They stay green all summer. Think how many flowers we would have! But I doubt if my neighbors would appreciate them. There is something about dandelion roots....they don't look like the top.

So often the problems we deal with in people's lives are not the real problem. They are the symptoms - the stalk, the leaf and the fruit. The problem is there is a root down underneath and that is what we need to get to. Until we deal with that root, we will never see the problem solved. Chop it off, trim it back, cut it down - but as long as you have that root there, it will grow and grow and grow.

I discovered another amazing thing. With a desirable plant, if you get just a little bit of the root out, it will never come back. However if it was a weed, I could get most of

the roots, but if I left just a little there, it would come back anyway. It is that way with bitterness. If you get most of it, but not all of it, you are still going to have trouble. It seems to regenerate and recover itself. If you don't do a thorough job you are in trouble.

“Root of bitterness” is God's term. It is hidden from sight. Others can't see it, but it is just as real as if it grew above ground. It is like the gall. It is out of sight. How many people parade their bitterness? Occasionally a fool will come along, but most people know the Bible better than to brag like that.

Let's look at the verse a little closer. “...Any root of bitterness springing up...” When that bitterness gets within us, it has a way of not coming up ever so gently and gradually like a seed that you would plant. But it is like those weeds that come up over night. It just seems to spring up all of a sudden. Sort of like the toy children play with - a jack-in-the-box. At first you don't see it and all of the sudden it is there. You may have kept that bitterness down, but it almost has a spring in it. You may have thought it was put behind you and hidden, and you wouldn't have to face it again. But if you haven't dealt with it properly, it will spring up.

What makes it spring up? You may feed it, for all you have to do is start thinking about how you were treated or misunderstood or not appreciated. Or you may remember something someone said to you and you won't have to go any further. That bitterness will come back. You don't have to look for it anymore. It will return if you feed it ever so little.

But let me say that sometimes you don't have to feed or fertilize it. It just sort of gets rained on. God sends the rain on the just and the unjust alike. You may question whether He would send watering to your bitterness? Yes, He will. He doesn't want bitterness, so why would He water it? So that you will know it is there. When He waters it, it springs up and you have to face it and you have a chance to deal with it. How does He water it? He lets someone cross your path. Isn't it a shame that they were shopping in the same store you were and that they couldn't come another day of the week? Or they may even come to visit your church. You get caught flat-footed because you were not expecting them to be there. God just lets it rain down and what you thought was gone sprang back up. You didn't feed it, but it was there anyway.

Another thought on springing up is that oftentimes it appears when you least want it to. You have masked and covered it and think it is well put behind. Then God will remind you about the referee you were sassing during the ball game. That is what happened to me as I prepared this message. Everything I said was right and I told God that. He told me He knew it was right and I felt justified. But then He asked me how I had said it. I told God that I brought it to his attention. How did I bring it to his attention? I answered, "Clearly." You don't talk to God like that do you - until He gets you into a corner like He had me? You might be perfectly right in the details but you may have been totally wrong because you are bitter. It will come springing up when there is no human explanation for it. God will open it up to you.

Then God says that this root of bitterness that springs up will trouble you. Bitterness is a strange sin. It first of all hurts the sinner and it most of all hurts the sinner. I have had people that have gotten bitter at me. It tore them up but I had never been affected because I didn't even know it.

Abraham Lincoln had a man brought to him that they wanted to put in a high federal

office. He interviewed the man for just a couple of minutes and dismissed him and then told them he didn't want the man hired. When asked why, he said that he didn't like the way the man looked. They said that he couldn't help how he was born. Abraham Lincoln agreed but said that he could have helped what had happened since then. Oftentimes sin has its way of showing up on the signboards of our body.

Do you know that there are roots out in the desert that can survive for years and years until the right amount of rain comes? Then they spring up and the plant blossoms and drops seeds down. There they wait until the next rain comes. It may be five to ten years or longer. Sometimes a root of bitterness will lie dormant in a soul. The Holy Ghost knows it is there, but we don't want to go looking for it. He can bring that thing up when we haven't thought about it for years. He can run it right by in front of us and let us know it is not dealt with. It will trouble us until we get it right.

In that same verse it says that it not only troubles the bitter person, but "thereby many be defiled." A bitter person affects those who are around them. I know this because I have so much trouble with bitterness. All I have to do

is get around someone else with a good case of the "bitters" and it is resurrected in my own bosom. I can't spend very long in their company or I become like them. It pollutes me too. I don't need that, so I don't fellowship very much with them. You may think that is cold. If I knew that someone had poisoned 8 people with cyanide in their coffee and they brought me a cup, I would be cold enough to reject it. If God says that their problem of bitterness is going to defile me also, then I am going to be cautious. I will be around them to pray for them and try to minister to them, but I won't be around them to be like them. When I get bitter, you would be better to leave me alone until I repent of it, unless you are going to preach to me and help me out of it. That is what the Bible says.

If there is a little bitterness rooting in a church a little leaven leaveneth the WHOLE lump. We are so tolerant of the bitter. We sit down and tell them we feel so-o-o-o sorry for them. It is a shame what they are going through and that they are so misunderstood. You may go on and pat them on the back and try to justify it, saying they are so spiritual not to have made an issue of it. (Just keep the bitterness inside.) It goes on and on and before

long they are able to give it to you and the two of you can share it with others. It only gets worse and worse. Two or three can defile a whole church. It only takes one to get it started and a couple to agree.

In Colossians 3:19 God warns us as husbands to love our wives and not to be bitter against them. He wasn't wasting words here. He knows us well, so if that is an arrow to anyone's soul, praise God and deal with it. If not just guard against it.

James 3:8-11 says, "But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing, My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?" Bitterness can be like a fountain or an artesian well that keeps spitting out that water. That is how bitterness develops once it gets going in you. It starts as gall and holds as a root, but before long it spouts like a fountain.

What about the blessing and cursing? The sweet water would have to be the blessing. The bitter water would have to be the cursing.

But Christians don't use curse words. We have learned how to curse without actually using curse words. How can this be done? If you work at it you will be able to accomplish it. You realize that there is a God in heaven that is going to bring vengeance on people. When someone crosses you, then you are sure you have met a person upon whom God should bring vengeance. So you tell God to give them what they deserve. The world has a very short way of saying it. They can get it into three words. But we extend it into long pious phrases in prayer. "God, I know Thou art righteous and this person is wicked. Look how they have mistreated me. I am waiting until You have the day of reckoning and make all things right. I can't wait for You to care for this individual after the things they have done to me and mine and those around me. Look at these circumstances and Lord, won't you visit them in horrible judgment?"

I haven't used a curse word yet, but I have said the same thing. It wasn't sweet water coming out. I was saying the same thing in acceptable terms. The world just spits it out in a few words and we say, "Shame on you. You shouldn't curse. You ought to pray." That is not praying. It is cursing.

I am glad God said it was a fountain and not a well. My great-granddaddy spent a little time out West and there was a restaurant out there that fell into disfavor with one of the local men. He decided to ruin their business. During the time of day when various people were going in and starting to eat, he slipped around out back and dropped a dead rat in the well. He hurried back out front, walked in and sat at a table. They brought him a glass of water while he was deciding what to order. He took a sip of the water and spat it out, screaming and hollering, "You are trying to poison me. There is something wrong with this water!" Now, you know the power of suggestion. You can imagine how other people tasted their water and spat and sputtered. They went out to check, and sure enough there was a dead rat in the well. It about ruined that restaurant.

You know, when you get a dead rat in a well, you can fish the rat out but that stink and poison will be there a long time. But if a rat is in a fountain and you get the rat out, the fountain will cleanse itself. Aren't you glad that when you get rid of your bitterness you are not stuck with it forever? God made it like a fountain. He promised that if you get that

poison out, all of it out, you will come fresh and clean again. This is a glimmer of hope.

You can read on in this passage and it describes further about how bitterness is earthly, sensual and devilish. That is of the world, the flesh and the Devil. It talks about the envying, strife, confusion, and every evil work that gets around that bitterness. Bitterness collects like a magnet a whole group of other wicked sins with it.

The next passage we want to consider is found in Revelation 10. I am not going to deal with the interpretation of the passage. I think most of you know that every Scripture has only one correct interpretation. However, many Scriptures have a number of applications that can be made from them. You never build doctrine off the applications. That is what the cults do. You always get your doctrine from the interpretation of the Scripture. If you start running to applications it is like tearing the walls of a river down, -- it turns it into a swamp. God has His Word like the banks of a river, to keep it flowing right.

I am going to make an application here. I think it will help us understand a little of how a person becomes bitter. Revelation 10:9,10 says, "And I went unto the angel, and said unto

him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey. And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter."

A child would understand this. There are things that you can take in through the mouth that taste sweet, but they can turn the stomach bitter. If you eat too much candy, or honey then you think that it is so sour down there. Perhaps you may think a little sweet will help. It makes it worse so you try more sweet and it just makes it worse. Most of us have to do it several times before we learn, if we ever do.

The cases of bitterness that I have observed in my life were not cases where I wanted to be bitter. But rather I wanted to be sweet. It was somebody I loved. It was the church that got hurt, some pastor friend, my child at school, my daughter playing basketball with that wicked referee. Do you follow what I am saying? Whenever you let your sweetness get beyond the boundaries of Scripture, things turn bitter in the belly. Misguided love, affection, concern for what is right can produce bitterness in the belly.

I remember taking a group that thought they were a church and thought they wanted a pastor. I wasn't there for very many weeks before a man told me he was bitter. I had already discovered that. He said he had a right to be bitter. The former pastor had been mistreated by some of the people in the church and he wouldn't forgive them because they hurt him terribly. I told him that whether they were right or wrong, he couldn't afford to be bitter. He insisted that he had a right to be bitter and that it was the best thing for him. I told him God couldn't use him in his bitterness. He said he would leave and go to another church. I told him if he stayed bitter God still couldn't use him, for it is not the location, but the bitterness that is the problem. He left and it solved a little bitterness in the church.

You see, that man was sweet and loving to his former pastor but he wasn't going to pay attention to Scripture. He allowed his love to run beyond Scripture and he got bitter. How often we want what is sweet in our mouth and we don't care how it shows up in our belly. Then we wonder why we are bitter. After all, this was in love and concern and for right. Why am I so bitter? Why do I have a problem? It must be an attack of the Devil. It is not that

at all. You resist the Devil and the bitterness stays. You may say that people are trying to put you under a load of guilt. No, that is the Holy Spirit bringing the bitterness out. When it comes to bitterness it usually is that we are just gobbling too much sweet.

I preach that people should be sweet to their pastor and I hope my people hear. I like it. I don't know anybody that doesn't like it. I like my children to be sweet towards me, but I hope that they will have a greater loyalty to God and His Word than they will to their daddy, lest they become bitter. This is a hard area to keep right.

Another passage to consider is Ephesians 4:30-32 where it says, "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

"Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God". Do not offend Him, reject His love, turn against Him, hurt Him emotionally. Do not upset Him and give Him sorrow over your condition. "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God" and so

affect Him so that He is not free to minister through you and use you. He may reside, but He may do so grieved.

The first thing you have to get rid of to stop from grieving the Holy Spirit is bitterness. "Let all bitterness...." It isn't let some of the bitterness go or just the bitterness that everyone knows about, or the bitterness that bothers you most or the bitterness that is least comfortable to keep. It is "let ALL bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice;" When you empty that out then fill up with, "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." Bitterness grieves the Holy Spirit of God. It has wicked partners and gracious antidotes.

How do you get out of bitterness? When gall is out of control it must be dealt with by proper diet. But sometimes a proper diet will not solve the problems of your gall. So then the doctor prescribes harsh medication. Sometimes the man of God has to come and dump some seemingly poisonous things upon you to get that gall of bitterness out of you. But if the medication doesn't do it, then they take you in for surgery and cut you open and

work on that gall bladder. Sometimes God gets out His scalpel and He rips open your spiritual chest and exposes what you have been hiding inside. He begins to cut and operate because a change of diet wouldn't do it. You waited too long. The harsh medication from the preacher wasn't sufficient. It takes God to work on you and He performs a divine surgery. Surgery by God is never pleasant.

You may realize that your bitterness is a root. It has to be dug out - every bit of it. It is not enough to cut it off at the ground, or cut the tap root. If you leave a little bit of root it will just come back up again sooner or later. You must dig it out. That means you dig all the way around the bottom of that root structure, and you dig even further just in case some of those little roots spread where you didn't see them. You have to haul a whole lot of things out of your life just to get that bitterness, because those roots get tangled in a lot of other things in your life. It is called repentance and confession.

You may say that your bitterness is like the fountain. You have to find where the poison is in the fountain. You have to seize it and remove it. Then keep it out.

Maybe yours is from too much sweetness in the mouth. Usually all you can do then is vomit it out. Let me say that when you start repenting of bitterness it will literally tear your insides spiritually until you feel like you have vomited everything you have inside. You may say that that isn't pretty, but bitterness isn't either. There has to be a full Biblical repentance and thorough confession of the sin, then a replacement with kindness, a tender heart, and forgiveness that must be practiced. You will learn to forgive like Christ forgave you, not because forgiveness is deserved. He forgave you when you didn't deserve it either. That is how you deal with bitterness. This is a subject which causes much weeping.

I believe that bitterness is practiced a whole lot more than we like to admit and conquered a whole lot less than we are willing to face. If we don't deal with it, we don't have to wonder why the Holy Ghost of God is grieved. We may insist that we have a little "problem" or "attitude" that we have put behind us and kept out of sight. God says it is the sin of bitterness and it must be dealt with.