

Bitterness: Now You See Me; Now You Don't

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice. (Ephesians 4:31)

THE BLAME GAME

Naomi, whose name meant pleasant, became bitter. Bitter against God. She felt she had been cheated and deprived of her life due to no fault of her own. She was having great difficulty processing the loss of her husband and sons. Naomi allowed the loss of family, home, and finances, to isolate her. The devastating loss, along with a horrific famine in the land, left Naomi cold and indifferent towards God and family.

While others, all things considered, were coping rather cavalierly with the crisis, Naomi turned inward and decided to fight God rather than accept His will for her life. Her worldview, along with her lofty personal expectations in life, had somehow been radically transformed, and she was now on the run. There was nobody else to blame, therefore in her mind, God was the most likely candidate, if not culprit, to blame.

After all, God “took” them from “her.” Naomi only saw herself in the picture. The fact others around her had suffered similar losses and doubtless were hurting equally, as a result, mattered little to Naomi. As far as she was concerned, it was Naomi against the world because Naomi had been done wrong by God.

Surely her loss was greater than theirs. God had dealt more treacherously and more bitterly with her. Bitterness can potentially leave a person dangerously, if not sinfully, selfish. The spiritual quarantine produced by “victimology” will always lead to the deepest, darkest, and most depraved pit of narcissism and bitterness. Woe is me! I have been done wrong!!

FRIENDS or FOES?

If we sin, we should encounter guilt. If others sin against us, we potentially contend with bitterness. Bitterness will never be determined by how egregious or how big the sin committed against us truly is, but bitterness can be accurately measured by its proximity to us. Bitterness is historically an in-house, inner-circle enemy. How close are the ones to us that violated us? The closer the violators are to us will determine the magnitude and weight of the level of bitterness we will contend with.

Be sure; bitterness is the most stealth of all spiritual enemies. Now you see it; now you don't. You think you overcame it, but surprisingly enough, it surfaces again at the most inconvenient of times. A name mentioned is usually all that is needed. There it is again. The nightmare is being relived all over again as if it is current news. The situation may be decades old. But bitterness is current, updated, and freshly thriving.

This covertly camouflaged enemy can be the most difficult to track. Diagnosing the virus of bitterness can prove to be a monumental challenge for the most skilled spiritual specialist. The root system is extremely convoluted and complex at times. Spiritual recovery requires patience, enjoined with a thorough digging up and a radically intense cleansing of the inner man. All of the attached root systems must be diligently extracted, and the taproot completely removed if spiritual restoration is ever attainable.

THE SILENT KILLER

Because bitterness is described as a root, most networking within the inner man is "underground," as it were. Out of sight. Unbeknownst to both the suffering child of God and those around them until it's too late. By the time the external traits of bitterness are revealed, and the root has "sprung up," many have already been defiled.

The damage can often be difficult, if not impossible, to repair. Often, many things have to be discarded, cast aside, and courageously started anew. Time spent underground only energizes and strengthens bitterness. Many will be hurt. Lines are drawn in fellowships, friendships, and close relationships. Again, the closer the transgressor, the deeper the hurt.

TEMPORARY or TERMINAL?

Bitterness often grows out of small offenses. Not necessarily an insignificant trespass, just a small one. An untimely word was spoken. A hurtful look passed. A silence whenever words of encouragement were needed. Painful neglect when comfort was anticipated. A simple misunderstanding that festers far beyond recognizing the original issue leads to a metastatic, cancerous wound deep inside a man.

Henceforth, once bitterness takes root, the consequences can be anything but small. If left unattended, bitterness has been known to be life-altering and forthrightly disastrous for all concerned or connected to the situation. Persons and not issues are always the prime target that bitterness faithfully serves. Seldom does anyone remember the initial issues or violations enough to articulate the details; however, we emphatically remember the ones involved as if it were only yesterday.

THE UNMASKING

In 1 Samuel 15:23, we discover the Hebrew word for rebellion. “Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.” The Hebrew word is defined as “bitterness.” Witchcraft is the circumventing of legitimate and ordained authority and the promotion and exalting of an alternative authority. The rest of verse 23 describes who the new authority becomes when bitterness/rebellion assumes control. It concludes “and stubbornness as iniquity and idolatry.”

Bitterness is triumphant when through a self-willed and self-centered attitude, we subtly blame God for our current station in life. Rather than accepting our current place and direction, we rebel against it. We become bitter because we are not getting our way. We forget that the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord.

We want to be in control of our destiny and the process thereof. We then stubbornly set ourselves up as an idol by becoming the self-appointed victim. Narcissistic behavior indicates idolatry. We set ourselves up on a throne higher than any man or even God. Everybody owes us an apology. Everybody is wrong but me. The whole world owes us. God has dealt treacherously with me.

THE ANTIDOTE

Humility, forgiveness, and a revival of unmeasured love will be the primary course of direction if healing and restoration are genuinely realized. The authentic attributes of the fruit of the spirit must be highly cultivated during the season and struggle with this formidable foe of bitterness. Forgiveness and love cannot be underestimated as the central spiritual catalysts towards recovery.

How often do I forgive my brother? The seventy times seven daily prescription is indicative of a perpetual and ongoing daily spirit that continually forgives. A resident spirit of forgiveness. Nobody counting. Nobody is keeping score.

Simply put, you are forgiven, and I love you. Two responses should be considered, and come to mind here, once offenses have come to us by men. Response one is mandated by love; “I love you, and there’s not one thing you can do about it.” Also, the adage is still relevant and poignant today “forgive and forget.”

How do I forget? Paul teaches us that forgetting is also an ongoing process. Every time the unfortunate scene of any offenses appears in your mind, we must immediately erase them. Cast them down. Forgetting those things that are behind us, we press beyond it, we press forward, and through it, by reaching forth towards a new era—a brand new beginning. So we keep on forgetting.

As God forgets our sins by never laying it to our account again and never holding our former sins over our heads, we too must forget in like manner. The sea of forgetfulness is the graveyard of yesterday's hurts and offenses. Each time the storm waves wash the offenses back onto the shores of our minds, we must cast them out to sea again. And again. And again. Forgetting again is a residual ongoing work of the spiritual man, for a man that has girded up the loins of his mind for spiritual battle against bitterness.

Submission to God is our resistance to bitterness (James 4:7). We must pray as Christ prayed when the whole world was turning against Him. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done. Where you lead me, I will follow.

Pastor Bill Pitman