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Discourse On Bitterness

22 So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23 Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. 24 And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" 25 So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet. (Exodus 15:22-25)ⁱ

8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh. 13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from

above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. 16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. 17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. 18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:8-18)ⁱ

The sweet water brings life, the bitter water, death. The sweet tongue blesses God, the bitter tongue curses men. The sweet spirit establishes peace, the bitter spirit, strife. Love and bitterness are opposites. Let's take a look into what God's Word has to say about bitterness. First, we'll define it. Next, we'll see where it comes from. Then we'll learn to recognize it. Finally, we'll see how to deal with it.

If we look at our text from James 3, we see that bitterness is envious, proud, and deceitful (vs. 14), it is earthly, sensual, and demonic (vs. 15), and it results in confusion and “every evil thing” (vs. 16). Moreover, bitterness is largely defined by contrast. It is contrasted with good conduct (vs. 13), heavenly wisdom (pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy [vs. 17]), and peace. (vs. 18)

In his essay, “How to be Free from Bitterness,” Pastor Jim Wilson says that, “Bitterness is what we feel when others sin against us,” and “is always based upon someone else’s sin—whether real or imagined.”ⁱⁱ Later, Pastor Wilson makes it clear that bitterness is not someone else's fault: “In reality bitterness is a sin that stands alone. The bitter person decides to be bitter independently of the offender.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, people can control their attitudes and reactions. They can decide whether or not to be bitter about an injury.

Bitterness is a wicked response to pain. It is a self-justifying, other-condemning reaction to suffering or offense and it has an object. When you are bitter, your bitterness is directed toward somebody or something.

Then where does bitterness come from? In Deut 29, as Moses remakes the covenant with Israel, he tells us that idolatry is the root of bitterness

14 “I make this covenant and this oath, ... 18 so that there may not be

among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood; 19 and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart’”

When you refuse to worship God, you become a root bearing bitterness. Idolatry, serving “the gods of these nations” (vs. 18), is self-service: “I follow the dictates of my heart.” (vs. 19)

Sin turns us into megalomaniacs, resulting in bitterness. (Since everything is about *me*, everything I object to was an intentional attack against *me*.) In particular, this is where bitterness against God comes from. If a man is not going to obey God, he becomes his own master, makes himself into a god, and becomes jealous of God. Moreover, the man thinks evil of God because he is at odds with God and all that belong to Him. The man has become a root of bitterness. It is hard for him not to see anything as if he is getting what “he deserves.” Even though what he really deserves is the last thing he wants or is willing to acknowledge. (“The wages of sin is death,”^{iv} etc.)

So Idolatry is the seed of bitterness, but the root comes from a failure to guard against it. It is natural for a fallen humanity. In other words, it comes by not actively avoiding it and counteracting the assaults of sin.

11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. 12 Therefore *strengthen* the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, 13 and *make straight paths* for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. 14 *Pursue* peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: 15 *looking carefully* lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any **root of**

bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;

(Heb 12:11-15)^v

Remember, bitterness is an evil response to pain. Pain happens. God chastens, trials come, and they hurt. In this text we see that it is necessary to be active in order to avoid the growth of the weed of bitterness. The verbs used here are active verbs. They are commands: strengthen (vs. 12), make (straight paths) (vs. 13), and pursue. (vs. 14) Plus, all need to be done in a vigilant manner: looking carefully. (vs. 15) In a fallen world, the root of bitterness grows without any help. Basically, all you have to do is nothing.

Bitterness reveals itself in many different ways. But all of them are tricky to recognize because bitterness is a root, a heart sin. It does not like to have the light shine on it directly. It delights in bearing bitter fruit, but it determines to surreptitiously achieve its ends: “confusion and every evil thing.” (James 3:16)

Bitterness loves the sins of the mouth. The tongue is the context in which our text is found (James 3:8-10). Also, in Luke 6, Jesus tells us that what comes out of a man's mouth reveals the heart. “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45) The reason bitterness is fond of vocal sins is because they are particularly good at creating all sorts of discord while creating a sort of buffer for the sinner. Gossip, slander, backbiting, and speaking evil of someone can all be couched in terms of concern for our neighbor, passing along prayer requests, etc. This allows the root of these sins to remain out of sight.

However, bitterness remains a root that will bear fruit. Sins that are more visible will tend to follow bitter people around. Strife, disputes, anger, and wrath frequently appear, and the frustrating thing about them is that they will seem to be inexplicable until the root can be dug up.

Heart sins also reveal themselves as a result of poor performance in Christian living. These are the sorts of things that can become apparent through godly pastoral counseling, evangelism, and faithful Christian parenting or mentoring. Their names are envy, vindictiveness, malice (ill will), thinking evil of

another, jealousy, spite, etc. All of these may be the fruit of a bitter root.

Now that we've defined bitterness, seen its origins, and learned how to recognize it, it is time to address how to deal with it: First, bring it to the cross. At the waters of Marah, God showed Moses a tree. A tree which had the curious property of turning bitter waters sweet. That tree was a type of the cross. It is the place where God has shown us how to die to ourselves. It is where God takes all idolatry and all false worship and covers it with the blood of Jesus. The cross removes the barrier between man and God and eliminates the origins of bitterness. It changes self-worship into true worship. "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even *as God in Christ forgave you.*" (Eph. 4:31-32)^v It is only by the cross, that God can forgive sinners.

Second, if you have bitterness, let it go. Forgive whoever you are bitter at. They may have really injured you, but your bitterness has harmed you more than they ever could have, and you have probably used it to justify harming them or others in the meantime. Put your bitterness away from you "and be *kind* to one another, *tenderhearted, forgiving one another*, even as God in Christ forgave you."

Finally, replace bitterness with love. This is the first and second commandment: Love God, and love your neighbor.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; *bears all things*, believes all things, hopes all things, *endures all things*. Love never fails. (1 Cor. 13:4-8)^v

On the cross, Jesus Christ showed all of us what Love is. God became a man, and died for other men, who didn't deserve it. That tree still makes bitter waters sweet. Therefore, take up your cross and follow Jesus.^{vi}

- i All quotations are taken from the NKJV Bible.
- ii <http://www.ccmbooks.org/pdf/Bitterness2010.pdf>, pg. 4 (7/27/2010).
- iii <http://www.ccmbooks.org/pdf/Bitterness2010.pdf>, pg. 7 (7/27/2010).
- iv Romans 6:23.
- v Emphasis added.
- vi Mark 10:21.