

THE ABOUNDING JOY OF NEW TESTAMENT HOPE - Part sixteen

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

HOW FAITH AND SIN ARE EACH GENERATED BY WHERE OUR HOPE IS PLACED (Pt. 6) - Bitterness

Romans 12:19 - "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"

1 Peter 2:21-23 - "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. [22] He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. [23] When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

Ephesians 4:32 - 5:2 - "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you....[5:1]....Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Matthew 5:44 - "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...."

Hebrews 12:14-15 - "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. [15] See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled...."

The single verse I read from **Matthew 5:44** is, however challenging it sounds, really the *least* striking part of the teaching of Jesus in that setting. When the words about blessing and praying for those who persecute us are read in their context we can see Jesus wasn't just talking about something good Christians should *do*. He was saying there is no possibility of following Him *at all* apart from this radical self-denying behavior.

Matthew 5:44-48 - "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. [46] For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? [47] And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? [48] You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus makes His point very clear. The measuring stick of being sons and daughters of God at all isn't my love for the people who are nice to me. The measuring stick is my love - my gracious forgiveness - to people who genuinely, totally without excuse, flat out wrong and hurt me.

The premise of this whole series of messages is that, like the very first words of the great hymn. "**The Solid Rock**" say, my whole life follows in the direction of where my "*hope is built*" - "*My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.*" This great hymn has always been a hymn, not about *doctrine*, but about *hope*.

I long for *satisfaction* and I long for *security*. God offers both of these and so does this fallen world. Each offers *promise* for my future. The false promise of sin for my future satisfaction and security is what makes temptation *tempting*. All of this to say that where I build my *hope* for future satisfaction and security determines the growth of *holiness* or the growth of *sin and addiction*.

But hope isn't something I can simply turn on or off at will. There are tools the devil uses to *deflect my hope from God alone*. We've been studying them for about five weeks now. There are attitudes of heart and mind that are not only wrong, but which open the door of my life to addictive, destructive patterns of hoping in self rather than God.

Please understand, the work of the devil isn't merely to get us to commit *acts* of sin. That would be just a partial victory. He wants his triumph to be much more complete and certain. He wants to orient my life around false hopes so I will continue to self-destruct even while he isn't around to tempt me directly.

Remember, Satan isn't omnipresent. He wants to capture our hope for the future. He wants to shift our hope so we *prefer* patterns of sinful addiction rather than learning to patiently trust in God. This is how he *locks* our future in sinful bondage we can't even see yet.

Today we will study one more tool of the devil to shift our hope from God to self for our satisfaction and security - *bitterness*.

1) **UNLIKE INDIVIDUAL ACTS OF DISOBEDIENCE, BITTERNESS, LIKE PRIDE, ANXIETY, IMPATIENCE, AND COVETOUSNESS ACTUALLY CHANGES THE INWARD DIRECTION OF MY HEART**

Hebrews 12:14-15 - "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. [15] See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled..."

It's that word "**defiled**" that needs to jump out. All sin brings **guilt**. All sins break God's **law**. But there are certain sins that don't just break a command. They **change our inward moral compass**. They "**defile**" in a way that is like a dangerous chemical in a town's water supply. Some sins pollute even when you're not thinking about them anymore. And **bitterness** is one of them.

That's why the writer of Hebrews lists bitterness as a **defiling** sin. It makes everything else about us dirty and contaminated. That's because of the way in which bitterness generates itself in our minds. Bitterness is the one sin that **feels** the least sinful when it's committed. This is especially true if I've been genuinely and deeply wronged. The more deeply I've been undeservedly hurt, the more my bitterness about it feels like **justice**. And nobody repents about loving **justice**. Repenting of bitterness in the face of wrongdoing feels like repenting of **holiness**.

This is where the craftiness of the devil shines. Because of the potential of bitterness to be a **justified** sin - or, at the very least, a much **ignored** sin - it has an easy time gaining momentum. Catch a Christian molesting a child and he's toast in any sane church. Steal money out of the offering plate and they'll snatch your membership. But anger and retaliation in the face someone who has done me wrong will seem like justice in the mind of many church-goers. **Bitterness gains a momentum most sins can't possibly achieve**. It has the potential, says the writer of Hebrews, to quickly "**defile many**."

Because bitterness doesn't **feel** like sin when I've been genuinely wronged, I can carry it around in my heart for a long time. The sin has time to **set** in my soul. I justify it when the Holy Spirit speaks. And that's where bitterness gets its **defiling** power. If you're taking communion some Sunday morning and your neighbor bumps you and you spill grape juice all over your white shirt, is it easier to get it our right away with your "**Tide pen**," or is it easier if you let that stain set for a year or so? I think you see my point.

2) **WHETHER WE THINK IT THROUGH OR NOT, THE DEFILING POWER OF BITTERNESS COMES FROM THE WAY IT SHIFTS MY HOPE FROM GOD**

I'm sure this idea is never processed by most Christians, but you can see the unpacking of it most clearly in **Romans 12:19** - "**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.**"

When you hold a grudge you doubt the judge. Bitterness is the response of a heart that no longer hopes in God's promise to deal with those who wrong me. Bitterness refuses to "**leave room for the wrath of God**." It refuses to place hope in what is "**written**"(19). Bitterness refuses to **wait** (remember how we studied the way hope is related to **patience**?).

In the same way, **hoping in God's promise** is the antidote to bitterness. Think about this. You need **more** than forgiveness for bitterness. You need a powerful **antidote** so the forgiveness you receive doesn't just result in repeated sins of more bitterness down the road. This is a **habitual** sin.

Paul says God has a promise for you when you have been unjustly treated by others. Paul says you can actually place your hope in what is "**written**"(19). You can "**leave room**" for God's wrath. God sees and knows all about the way others are treating you. He will settle all the uneven scores of life. I can forgive and forget with no thought of retaliation because nobody will get away with any sin committed against my life.

This promise is repeated over and over again in the Scriptures:

2 Thessalonians 1:4-7 - "Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your **steadfastness and faith** in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. [5] This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— [6] since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, [7] and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels...."

You can see this truth even more clearly in the book of Revelation. Particularly at the destruction of Babylon - that picture of the world's system in rebellion against God - **Revelation 18:16 & 20** - "Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls!18:20....Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!"

Then all the saints who had been slain and martyred and are around the throne of heaven join in and sing - **Revelation 19:1-2** - "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, [2] for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.'"

So a part of my *hope in God* is relying on His plan to deal not just with *my* sins, but the sins of those who mistreat me. Hoping in God means letting Him *be God* over those who wrong me. And Jesus came and died, full of love and grace, and *also* modeling what that kind of hope in God looks like when we are treated abysmally by others:

1 Peter 2:22-23 - "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. [23] When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

So my anger and bitterness isn't holy and it isn't just. It's *unbelief*. It's *not* placing my hope in Father God. I don't really trust that God has the future of those who wrong me in His hand. If I place my hope in Him, I will rest in that future.

3) **"BUT WHAT IF THE PEOPLE WHO WRONG ME ARE CHRISTIANS? HOW CAN I BE SURE GOD ISN'T GOING TO GET SOFT-HEARTED AND FORGIVE THEM?"**

We all laugh at those *Jonah-like* words, but there's a hint of self-protection in our giggles. There's something in every one of us that is honestly bugged when people who wrong us get grace and free pardon instead of what they deserve.

God has only *two ways* of dealing with all sin - every sin that is ever committed or ever will be committed:

- a) ***Tragically, some will have their unrepentant, stubborn hearts punished eternally in hell for the wrongs they've committed in this world.*** We've already read some passages of Scripture about that.
- b) ***Those who honestly confess and repent of their sin are graciously and freely forgiven.*** Jesus came and shed blood to identify with fallen, guilty sinners. He died in their place. Forgiveness is granted if they will repent and place their *hope* in Him. He did the same for you and me too, but the way.

But the important point right now is sin is never *ignored*. *All* sin is judged - *fully* judged. Paul goes to great lengths in the book of Romans to show that God is still just, even when he freely forgives the guilty - **Romans 3:26** - "To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."

So God is just because he *never* ignores sin. He never leaves any sin unpunished. That includes any and all sin that has ever been committed *by* you and all sin committed *against* you. Some of those wrongs will be judged when Jesus comes again. The rest have already been judged in the body of Jesus Christ, on the cross. He committed no sins of His own. He died for *other* sins. Yours and mine.

"Well, that's my problem, pastor Don. I'm mad at Joe for what *he's* done to me. I'm not mad at *Jesus*. I want justice. I don't want *Jesus* paying for Joe's sin. I want *Joe* paying for Joe's sin against me."

That's a very common attitude. And here's what you should do when you find it growing in your unspoken heart. Bring that heart to the communion table. We have it more than most evangelical churches. We do it almost every two weeks.

Let me suggest that, just for once, you don't come thinking about *your* sins at all. Come thinking about your *enemies'* sins. Think about Jesus and His broken body. Think of all the marvel of the incarnation - the crucifixion - the resurrection - all for that one enemy of yours.

And then, just as the cup is coming up to your lips, close your eyes, pray a little prayer and say, ***"I'm sorry Lord. That just won't do. I'm so upset with my brother that this won't quite make up for how mean he's been to me."***

"Well, I'd never do that, Pastor Don." Sure you would. In fact, whether you say those words or not, that's exactly what you're saying about your Lord if you still harbor bitterness and anger against your brother in your heart.

4) **BITTERNESS IS OVERCOME NOT ONLY BY TRUSTING GOD'S PROMISE TO AVENGE WRONGS DONE AGAINST ME. IT IS OVERCOME BY CHERISHING THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING FREELY FORGIVEN BY GOD MYSELF**

Ephesians 4:32 - 5:2 - "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you....[5:1]....Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Let me give you a simple test for your growth in Jesus: You know you're growing in the Lord when you move past understanding the ***theology*** of forgiveness to enjoying being an ***agent*** of the very same kind of forgiveness you've been granted in Jesus. In other words, you know you're a son or daughter of God when you're not just a ***receiver*** of divine life, but a ***transmitter*** of the very same kind of divine life.

Consider this. We all want to be ***godly***. At least, so we say. And you are never ***more*** like God than when you freely and cleanly and totally forgive an enemy.

And all those who can still grow further in this truth said...