



## **Uprooting Bitterness in Our Life Together** **Life Together: Cultivating Covenant Community Series #7**

**Ephesians 4:31-5:2**

**David Sunday**

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Oh, Lord, we wish we could promise that we would never forsake You. But Lord, we often fail and are unfaithful to You. We thank You, however, that when we are faithless, You remain faithful. You have shed the blood of our perfect High Priest to claim us as Your own and You will not abandon those for whom Jesus laid down His life and rose from the dead. We thank You that You are with us now and will be addressing us, exhorting us, admonishing us, comforting and counseling us through Your Word. We pray, Lord, that You would open our ears, our eyes and our hearts to behold wondrous things from You in Your Word. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please turn in your Bible to Ephesians 4. Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday of the year. It sets off a wonderful time of rejoicing, as we also begin Advent and celebrate the promise of the incarnation and Christ's second coming. I want you to know how thankful I am for you as a church.

I often hear reports of how this body is ministering to one another behind the scenes and it happened again this week. I hear about words of encouragement spoken and actions taken to show the love of Christ in tangible ways in our life together. When I hear these things, it rekindles my sense of joy and delight to be part of the body of Christ and the fellowship of believers.

One of the things that has been on my heart for our church this year is that you would know that you are loved. This has been our prayer: May the Lord direct your heart into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Jesus Christ. I want you to know that I love you and I am thankful for you as a church. I hope you love this body of believers and I hope that you experience God's love when you gather with the people of New Covenant Bible Church.

I also hope that you know He is with us right now in love, even when God comes to us with a surgeon's scalpel in His hand to uproot from our hearts those things we hold tightly to and things we are afraid we cannot live without. He comes to take away those precious idols. Even when God's Word is doing deep surgery in our hearts, I hope you know, believe and trust that it is your Father's love for you that causes Him to admonish you, exhort you and do this painful, sanctifying work in your life. Do you trust Him with that?

You are going to need to trust Him today because, as we conclude this series on cultivating life together, we have been looking at some of the poisons that contaminate covenant life in the community of believers. We have been using our church covenant loosely as a guide and it addresses some of the toxins we need to get rid of in our life together.

The last one we are looking at is hard because it becomes addicting. When you drink this poison, you get addicted to it. It becomes the drug of choice for those who are used to drinking this poison. If anyone tries to confront it or suggest that you may have a problem with this in your life, you immediately become defensive. You feel threatened, because drinking this poison makes you feel safe. You can deceive yourself into thinking, "I am entitled to this." You can also feel there is protection under the covering of this poison.

I'm talking about bitterness. When resentment becomes rancid and rotten in our souls, that is bitterness. God's Word comes to us and directly speaks to this. Scotty Smith wrote a prayer called "The Wasted Energy of Resentment." He confesses that resentment and bitterness are like harboring a criminal, for "bitterness is bent on criminal activity... stealing peace, vandalizing sleep, robbing relationship, killing kindness, murdering hope, infecting the innocent with deadly toxins... These are just a few of bitterness' crimes."

Bitterness is a criminal for sure, but it is a criminal that tries to get cozy with you. He can seem so benign. It is easy to snuggle up with bitterness, get comfortable and feel a sense of security as you harbor him in your heart. You don't want to deliver him over to the authorities of God's Word and God's Spirit. You don't want to evict Him from Your life because you have become co-dependent; you can no longer imagine life without your criminal friend, bitterness, dwelling inside you.

It really becomes an issue of whose authority you submit to. Will you let the authority of God's Word and God's Spirit trump the authority of your own emotions? God's Word comes to us very forcefully, but remember, it is full of love and mercy and aims to heal and bless us. Let's listen to what God says. We are going to read Ephesians 4:31-5:2.

Paul said to the Ephesians:

*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another,*

*tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

This is God's Word. Thank Him for it. Amen. Thank You, Lord, for Your Word.

Let's focus laser-like on the first phrase of verse 31. It says, "*Let all bitterness...be put away from you.*" I like the NIV here. It directly says, "Get rid of all bitterness..." Get rid of it! Don't harbor that criminal in your heart. How do we do that?

### **Acknowledge the Toxic Presence of Bitterness**

First, get rid of all bitterness by acknowledging its toxic presence. You cannot get rid of something if you don't recognize that it is there. What is the first thing many of us do if someone suggests that we may be bitter about something? We deny it. We say, "I'm not bitter." You can see it in someone else. It shows up in their face, and a tone of voice usually accompanies it. It is very obvious when someone is bitter, but the person who is bitter cannot see it nearly as easily as those who are watching from the outside.

We won't get rid of anything unless we believe that our lives would be better without it. We become hoarders of bitterness. We let it crowd and clutter our hearts because we think we can't bear to live without it. Everyone around us can see that this junk in our hearts is diminishing and destroying our lives, but we grow attached to it. We are not going to get rid of it unless we recognize it is there and it is ruining our lives.

Do you remember Naomi in the Old Testament? She had gone through famine. She had to leave her homeland and move to Moab. Then her husband died and both of her sons, Mahlon and Chilion, died. She was left bereft of everything dear to her. She was a widow; she was outside of her homeland; she didn't have a husband or sons; and life was rough.

Naomi was bitter and she knew it. She acknowledged it. Naomi said, "*It is exceedingly bitter to me...that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me*" (Ruth 1:13). Her bitterness changed her self-identity so much that when she and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, she said to her old friends, "*Do not call me Naomi (which means 'pleasant'); call me Mara (which means 'bitter'), for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty*" (Ruth 1:20-21a). Naomi settled into a habit of bitterness. She grew so attached to it that she requested a new identity, a new name: "Call me Bitter; that will be my name from here on out."

For the bitter person, it seems like there are compelling reasons to hold on to bitterness. If you don't understand that, you will never be very helpful to anyone who struggles with bitterness. If you think it is easy to get rid of it, you will speak glibly about it. People who speak glibly about bitterness and give the impression that it's simple to get rid of are usually people who have never been hurt very deeply themselves.

Ruth did not treat Naomi's bitterness glibly or harshly; instead, she walked with her, devoted herself to her and tenderly pointed her back to the evidences of God's grace and goodness in her life. Through Ruth's faith and confidence in the goodness of God and through the way Ruth took refuge under the shadow of God's wings, Naomi was brought to a fresh recognition that God is not her enemy. His ways were full of goodness and mercy toward her all the days of her life. Ruth was a great example for us. She showed us that it's possible to be experiencing the same realities that make one person bitter and, instead of responding with bitterness to those realities, to respond with blessing and glory to God.

Get rid of all bitterness by acknowledging its toxic presence. You are not going to get anywhere by saying, "I'm not bitter! I'm not bitter! I'm not bitter!" I would suggest that, if you live long enough, you are going to have to engage in some bitterness prevention in your life. You are going to have to face the reality that bitterness seeks to infect your heart and soul. You will not be able to live life long without having to face this temptation. Acknowledge it if it's there; don't pretend it's not.

### **Trace the Causes of Bitterness**

Second, get rid of all bitterness by tracing its causes. What are some of the causes of bitterness? I want to give thanks for a little booklet called [How to Be Free From Bitterness](#) by Jim Wilson. His son, Douglas Wilson, is a pastor in Idaho who has also written about this on his blog. I'm going to be drawing from both father and son in some of these observations.

What are some of the causes of bitterness? It can be caused by many things. One is worshiping false gods. Let look at a passage from Jeremiah. In 2:13, God said, "My people have committed two evils. They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and they have turned to broken cisterns that can hold no water." He continued in 2:19, "*Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy [your turning away from Me] will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, declares the Lord God of hosts.*"

Sometimes, there is bitterness in our lives because we have forsaken the Lord. As a corollary, I would suggest that anytime we are harboring bitterness in our hearts there is an

element of forsaking the Lord. There is something we are not trusting and believing about God when we harbor bitterness. So one cause of bitterness is worshiping false gods and forsaking the Lord.

Another cause of bitterness is greed and envy. Listen to this passage from Acts 8:18-23. Simon the Magician seized the power that was upon the Apostle Peter. Verses 18-19 says, *“Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’”*

So this was a man who was filled with greed and Peter said to him in verses 20-23:

*“May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”*

Greed and envy are often the causes the gall of bitterness and the bondage of iniquity becomes our prison.

Another cause of bitterness is sinful sweetness. Sin can have a sweet taste for a little while. You have tasted this. You know what it is like to go after sin. You are allured by it, but bitterness sets in afterwards. Proverbs warns about this in relation to adultery. Proverbs 5:3-4 says, *“For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.”*

There are manifold causes to bitterness. When we experience bitterness, we should seek to trace the causes. “Have I been worshiping false gods? Am I filled with greed and envy? Am I experiencing the bitter fruit of tasting sin’s sweetness?”

One of the main causes of bitterness is disappointment from someone to whom you are closely related and whom you feel has let you down. You are not usually bitter about something that happens around the world or from someone who is not close to you. You may be appalled or saddened about those things that are done but are not close to you. Bitterness happens with your husband or your wife. Or you could be bitter toward your son or daughter; toward your parents; toward your church family; toward a church you were once a part of; toward a pastor, a leader or a coworker. It is someone close to you.

You could be bitter toward God. That was Naomi’s problem and it was Jonah’s problem as well. At the end of Jonah (chapter four), after Nineveh repented and Jonah went under a

broom tree. He was so bitter that he wanted to die. He was bitter because God was so good to the Ninevites. God was merciful to his enemies. Jonah was disappointed in God.

Bitterness often springs from the experience of a wrong done from someone close to you. That wrong can be real or imaginary. Think about that for a minute. It is very possible to be bitter over imaginary wrongs. You hear that someone said something about you or did something toward you, and you become bitter about it. But you never went to the source to see if it was even real. Rumors fly around and you are bitter about this or that. You are imagining things that are not even true, allowing it to make you bitter.

Or it could be that you have unrealistic or unbiblical expectations for people in your life. You feel they have let you down, but you really need to reexamine and re-coordinate your expectations to reality. I think that was Naomi's problem. She believed God dealt bitterly with her, but Ruth experienced the same reality of widowhood and did not imagine the worst about God. Ruth believed in the goodness of God.

So there are imaginary causes, but let's set those aside now and think about the fact that real wrongs are done in this fallen, sinful world. There is real evil. If you live here long enough, you will be assaulted. You will be hurt by people who hate God and hate one another. That is one of the ways Paul described humanity in his letter to Titus. Apart from grace, we are haters of God and haters of one another.

Our main passage says that these things are characteristic of fallen humanity: wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice. Living in a world like this, we experience terrible violations of justice. People lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery and act in hard-hearted, cruel ways. As a result of their sin, you might lose your job, your marriage, your livelihood, your peace of mind or even your friendships.

So you've experienced a great hurt. A deep wrong has been done or, even worse, the same wrong has been done over and over and over again by someone close to you. It doesn't even have to be that deep, but it just gets repeated again and again and again and again.

Then bitterness is intensified by the fact that no one seems to understand what you've experienced. How can other people be happy when your life is so miserable? How can they act so carefree, so nonchalant, when you have suffered a great wrong?

Your sense of justice rises up: "This isn't right!" you say. "I don't deserve this!" You're right! You are created in God's image and you have dignity and honor. Your dignity has been assaulted and you are experiencing a yearning for justice, fairness and vindication. So what do you do?

You think over a number of possibilities. Let's be honest: what goes on inside is not pretty. You mull over what you can do to hurt that person. "Oh, If I could just get my hands on him...! I could ruin his life." However, since you are a law-abiding citizen who cares about your own reputation, you don't take matters into your own hands.

So what do you do? You cherish that resentment. You seethe over that injustice and you grow bitter. Trace its causes.

### **Consider the Effects of Bitterness**

Third, get rid of all bitterness by considering its effects. What happens when you get bitter? You know you're bitter when:

- You have a sharp memory for all the details. Douglas Wilson says, "Bitterness has good study habits. Review, review, review..." When you go over something over and over again in your mind, it is probably the effect of bitterness starting to take root.
- There are anonymous critiques or attacks. Wilson says, "Bitter words are frequently unsigned." Psalm 64:2-4 gives us an example of this: "*Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the throng of evildoers, who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush at the blameless, shooting at him suddenly and without fear.*" When we issue anonymous attacks, send anonymous letters, make accusations, and say mean-spirited things, we are really saying, "I don't care enough about you to try to work on this relationship. I just want you to feel as bad as I feel and I just want you to struggle with these accusations." It's a sign of bitterness.
- Imaginary conversations occur in your mind. "He said this to me and I'm going to say this to him." You go on and on; you can concoct a whole drama in your mind of what you would say.
- You find yourself justifying what you would never approve of in other circumstances. You call evil "good" and good you call "evil." You call bitter "sweet" and sweet you call "bitter" (Isaiah 5:20).
- Your heart and your mouth are full of bitterness. Romans 3:14 says, "*Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.*" When you are bitter, it spills out. Out of the abundance of your heart, your mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). Amy Carmichael beautifully said, "For a cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, however suddenly jolted." If your heart is full of sweetness, what is going to come out of your heart, even if you are suddenly jolted? Sweetness. But if bitterness comes out when you are jolted, what does it tell you? You have bitterness in your heart.

Dane Ortlund puts it like this: "The bitterness you harbor, the emotional punishment you exact in your heart, has precisely the opposite effect over time than you think. Bitterness does

nothing to the offender, while it quietly destroys the offended. Resentment kills and hollows out, the resenter, not the resented.”

Douglas Wilson says it’s like a vandal who comes into your house and smashes some of your precious belongings. Bitterness goes down into the basement, gets a sledgehammer and goes around smashing every other precious belonging in the house. You are agreeing with the vandal. He took some of your precious things. That was wrong! But bitterness says, “I’m going to destroy everything else in my life to get back at that vandal.” Who are you hurting in the process?

I think I’ve told you before about my mom. She was beginning to get very bitter early on in her marriage to my dad. It was right around the time I was born. Through the teaching of God’s Word, she realized that she had been harboring bitterness in her own heart toward her dad who had left her when she was nine years old and played virtually no role in her childhood. When she married my dad, she realized her bitterness toward her dad was poisoning the sweetness of her marriage.

I remember my mom telling me when I was a young teenager that she realized she needed to rid herself of bitterness. She understood that she did not trust my dad, even though he had not given her a reason to distrust him. I know that she did get rid of all bitterness because, many years later, I saw how she lovingly cared for her father at the end of his life when he had nowhere else to turn. I don’t know if he ever asked her for forgiveness for the wrongs he had done toward her, but her love for him was not dependent on his asking for forgiveness. Her heart had been freed from the contamination of bitterness. There is much joy and blessing in my own life because I did not grow up with a mom harboring bitterness in her heart toward a dad who had given her reason to be bitter.

Get rid of all bitterness by considering its effects.

### **Destroy the Roots of Bitterness**

Finally, get rid of all bitterness by destroying its roots. Hebrews 12:15 says, *“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.”* Bitterness has roots. It is one of those things that you start digging up and before you know it, you have half the yard dug up. It goes deep. The only way to get rid of bitterness is to get down to the roots and plant in the soil of your heart more powerful and more potent gospel realities that serve as an antidote to those seeds of bitterness.

One root you must plant in your heart is that justice will be done in this world. We live in a messed-up world. Many wrongs are done. People get away with murder. But Paul says in

Romans 12:19, *“Beloved, never avenge yourselves [neither through physical activity nor through holding bitterness in your heart], but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”* God will make every wrong right.

Romans 12:20-21 continues, *“To the contrary, ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

No one gets away with evil. Every sin and every bitter deed and thought will be punished, either on the cross or in hell. God will bring justice. God will bring consequences for evil actions. You must be convinced that justice will be done.

Second, in order to destroy the roots of bitterness, you must plant the reality in your heart and be convinced that bitterness is a great sin. Independent of any of the sins that provoke it, bitterness is a great sin. You must have that conviction if you are going to get rid of all bitterness. When you are bitter, you are responding to evil with evil. You are not overcoming evil with good.

Your bitterness will breed more bitterness in the lives of those who love you and those whom you are called to love. That is what Hebrews 12:15 says. When that root springs up, many are defiled. Churches have been destroyed through bitterness. God never gives anyone a right to be bitter and He never excuses this sin. It is never good for you to hold on to it. When God says, “Get rid of all bitterness,” He is not speaking as a disinterested, detached observer. He is speaking as One Who “bore every bitter thought, every evil deed, crowning His blood-stained brow.” Jesus bore our bitterness on the cross. That tells you how evil it is and it tells you how powerful the gospel and the Spirit can be to remove it from your life.

Could it be that God wants to use your sin of bitterness to draw attention to your own guilt, so that this Thanksgiving you will overflow with thankfulness for the grace God has shown you in Jesus Christ?

I heard John Piper talking about this. He said, “We have to see our sin, but some of us have grown up in such goody-goody homes that we don’t think we have ever done anything serious. When we get hurt, we become bitter. We become offended... “The solution is not to fix the other person. The solution is to gain a heart that is overflowing with gratitude for grace from Christ that spills over with grace toward others.”

This is the last thing we need to do to destroy the roots of bitterness. From the One Who can change the heart, you must be given a heart that is overflowing with gratitude for the grace and mercy God has given you in Christ in spite of your sin.

Did you see that in the passage we read earlier? Ephesians 4:32 says, *“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”* Who has more

reason to be bitter and offended and to resent the sins done against him—Christ or you? What if He had treated you for your sins the way you treat others who have sinned against you? Thank God that, even though He had every reason to be resentful and bitter toward us, He laid it all aside when He atoned for our sins on the cross. We see this again in Ephesians 5:2: “*And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*”

C.S. Lewis said, “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” Do you believe that? Lewis continued,

This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single person great injury. But [what is hard is] to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life—to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son—how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say our prayers each night: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves.

## Response

As we close, keep in mind that we must come to Jesus about our bitterness. Jesus wants to draw you to Himself. I'm going to suggest that you pray the lyrics to this song in order to cultivate a profound amazement at Christ's love for you in your sin. You will be praying, “Oh, that I would see what Jesus has done on the cross—the power and beauty of it!”

Oh, to see the dawn  
Of the darkest day:  
Christ on the road to Calvary.  
Tried by sinful men,  
Torn and beaten, then  
Nailed to a cross of wood.

Now the daylight flees,  
Now the ground beneath  
Quakes as its Maker bows His head.  
Curtain torn in two,  
Dead are raised to life;  
'Finished!' the victory cry.

This, the power of the cross:  
Christ became sin for us,  
Took the blame, bore the wrath:  
We stand forgiven at the cross.

Oh, to see my name  
Written in the wounds,  
For through Your suffering I am free.  
Death is crushed to death,  
Life is mine to live,  
Won through Your selfless love.

Oh, to see the pain  
Written on Your face  
Bearing the awesome weight of sin;  
Every bitter thought,  
Every evil deed  
Crowning Your bloodstained brow.

This, the power of the cross:  
Son of God, slain for us.  
What a love! What a cost!  
We stand forgiven at the cross.

(The Power of the Cross, Stuart Townend & Keith Getty)

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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