

(Hebrews - Part 44): The Root of Bitterness

by A.W. Tozer

A.W. Tozer emphasizes the dangers of bitterness in the Christian life and the necessity of vigilance and God's grace in overcoming it.

Duration: 23:22

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Galatians 5:16, Ephesians 5:15, Hebrews 12:14-15, 1 Peter 5:8, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Expositional"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the need for believers to be vigilant and watchful in their spiritual lives. He compares the challenges and dangers faced by believers to various threats in the natural world, such as blight, insects, birds, drought, and frost. The preacher highlights the importance of not failing to respond to God's grace and warns against allowing roots of jealousy, evil temper, pride, deceit, and spite to take hold in one's heart. He likens the church to an army in the field, constantly facing danger and requiring constant vigilance to stay alive. The preacher urges believers to follow peace with all men in holiness and to be on guard against any root of bitterness that may trouble them and defile others.

Transcript

You remember we're going through this slowly, nibbling as we go along, getting what we can out of it. Last Sunday I called attention to verse 14, that we are to follow peace with all men and holiness. Now in verse 15 he says, without breaking the sentence, there's only a colon there.

He says, 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. I want you to notice the word there, looking diligently. That is, beware, take heed, look out.

And this cry is heard throughout the entire New Testament, in fact throughout the entire Bible. The reason is the kind of world we are living in. If we were living in a sinless world, did you ever think the word, beware, never would have been invented? The words, take heed to yourself, never would have been invented.

Look out, never had any occasion. Help, help, those are words nobody ever would have uttered. Police, nobody ever would have uttered those words.

A third of our vocabulary would be absent if we lived in a sinless world. For because we live in the kind of world we do, God has to be flashing red lights continually before us. And one of them is, look out.

This is the warning, the alarm, to be on the alert, to be watchful and to wait. Now, the Holy Ghost sees the Church a little differently from the way men see the Church now. The Holy Spirit and the scriptures, the Lord and his apostles, see the Church as an army in the field.

And because it's an army in the field, there is always danger. There is the sniper and there is the danger of ambush, there is the sudden attack, there are the booby traps that look innocent but kill you. And all these require constant vigilance just to stay alive.

Those of you who have had military training know that one of the first things they teach you is how to stay alive. They don't throw you out as meat to a hungry dog, but they say, You're our boys, we want you to stay alive. Then they teach you how to stay alive.

So God sees the Church as an army in the field and says, I want you to stay alive. But he also sees the Church as a flock in the wilderness and says, There are dangers, the wolves ready to tear you, the bear ready to leap and silent us upon you, poison food which you may take and die, and there is always a chance of straying. The result is necessarily that you must be watchful.

You don't look after yourself as sheep, but somebody else looks after you. And if you think of yourself as a sheep, your business will be to keep close to the shepherd. See to it that you do, beware that you don't stray.

But the Holy Spirit also sees the Church as a company of travelers in the forest. And of course the dangers are robbers and predatory animals and falls and getting lost and dozens of other things that can happen when a traveler is going through the woods alone. And then the Holy Ghost sees the Church as a garden under cultivation.

Those of you, and it would be a few at least, who have lived on a farm or have tried to cultivate a seed garden know that there are numbers of things that can happen in a garden. Blight can come along, insects can destroy a garden, birds can destroy it, drought can come, and frost can come too early. So because we are this kind of people in this kind of world, the scriptures say you are to look diligently.

Because you are part of an army getting shot at, because you are part of a flock, because you are part of a company of travelers, because you are a garden in the wilderness, therefore you must look diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God. There are various translations of this, lest any man fail to respond to God's grace, or lest any man fail to avail himself of God's grace, or lest any of you miss the grace of God. I tell you here, we won't go into this profoundly, this failing of the grace of God.

I can see John Calvin and John Arminius squaring off here, but I won't take sides with either one. I'll only point out here that the scripture says that it's possible for us to fail of the grace of God. That is, fail to respond to God's grace or prove false to God's grace.

And it would seem to me that the persons, these would-be persons, who have the look of Christians but aren't Christians, they have the language of Christians but aren't Christians, they have a reputation among the Saints as being Christians but are not Christians, they have the confidence of God's people but they are not Christians, they have not obtained the grace of God, they have failed or missed the grace of God in some way or other. Now, I submit that here is what the ancient Anglo-Saxon called scathed. That word

we don't have any more used in its positive sense, scathed.

But we use the word unscathed, and we use the word scathing, and it means a harm or an injury, a hurt or a misfortune. And I say to you that this is everlasting scathing if we miss the grace of God. This is eternal hurt if we miss the grace of God.

This is misfortune beyond the power of man to describe, better a thousand times lose an eye or both eyes and feel your way through life until God take you home, than to fail of the grace of God and bring upon yourself this incurable scathe, this awful hurt on the soul, better a thousand years in prison, better death at the hands of the public executioner, than to endure this scathe of God upon your soul, the awful hurt of sin there. And what is it that's going to scathe us here, that's going to hurt us? Well, it says, lest any root of bitterness spring up. A root of bitterness, thinking of the garden now.

Here comes a poisonous, deadly root, springing up and causing many, many people to be defiled. This is not a seed, but an old root believed dead. Occasionally you hear of Christians who got along all right because they were not put under the pressure sufficient to show how bad they were and what poor Christians they were.

I think of one of our missions here. Several years ago we ran in our magazine a story of a Saint in one of our fields. He was a Saint, and truly a Saint, they said, and we had no reason to doubt it.

He had a reputation for being the praying man, for being the Bible-loving man, for being the counselor to which young Christians could come. And then came a period of political upheaval on that field and a realignment of things, and the Church got divided. And now, last week in New York, I heard a part of the letter read and heard it discussed on the Board, that this old man, he's a man now well along in years, has turned against the Church, turned against the true Church, has turned against Brother Copp and Brother Joelie of Bumi and the other men of God who are there, who are indeed men of God.

And the old man now hates these Christians with a hatred that Brother Copp describes as alarming. He said, I know now what it is to be hated, to be hated for myself, to be hated with an alarming hatred. Now, I don't know what.

I can't describe this, and I shall not pretend to. I'll only say that here was a rose of bitterness that lay dormant, not dead, but dormant for a lifetime. And then when a shift in the political winds and a division in the Church came up, not an actual division within the Church, but a group who claimed they were the Church and weren't, who had been kicked out of the Church, when this division came, this rose of bitterness springs up.

And for a man who has looked to heaven for half a lifetime, or a lifetime, and has earned the reputation for being a modern saint in ebony, that he now will turn and hate a man of God with an alarming hatred. This, my brother, is what it means. Take heed for this scape, this harm, this awful injury to the soul that comes when the root of bitterness springs up.

Now, this hidden root of bitterness was unnoticed, but it was lying there. And when the circumstances shifted about and the squeeze got on, or to keep my figure somewhere decently logical, to say when the weather, when the spiritual moral weather got to a place where the root could sprout, then it suddenly sprouted up and poisoned how many. Now, what are these roots of bitterness? I don't have time to talk about them at length.

I'll only name some of them. One would be the hidden root of bitterness in the Church. Any report against any member of the Church, whispered about.

Any slumbering grudges, quarrels, lying quiet like a bitter root waiting to spring. Any differences over any non-critical matters. What is the cure? What am I to do? Dig that slumbering root out and plant in its place the sweet myrrh and rose of Sharon and lily of the valley.

In the individual heart, what root of bitterness might it be? Love of money is one, desire for revenge is another. I was thinking about a pastor I knew when I was in my teens. I got converted, incidentally I was converted when I was 17, and I joined that church.

I was fresh off of the farm and dumber than the average, and knew as little about religion as was possible to know, except I knew the Lord Jesus was my Savior. I remember how I was treated by this pastor. I remember his name.

That was so long ago that I don't even want to remember how long ago it was. But do you know what I caught myself doing this very week? I caught myself thinking over again some of the things that that pastor had said to an ignorant country boy, bitter, abusive things, and I had to ask God to help me to forget it and never remember it again. Why, I hadn't thought of that for so long, I didn't know it was there at all.

It must have been in my subconscious, because it couldn't have been in my conscious mind. I had trouble remembering the man's name. But do you know the human mind is such a tremendous thing? Not mine or yours, but ours.

The human mind is such a tremendous thing. It is such a vast storehouse of so many things. I hesitate to quote psychologists, they are mostly off the deep end one way or the other.

But if they are telling the truth, then you never forget anything. It just sinks below the level of consciousness, of the conscious mind down into the subconscious, if there is such a thing. You can dig it up later on.

There is only one thing I know to do with the subconscious cistern, and that is, take the lid off of it by the grace of God and turn the sun of righteousness loose on it to kill all of the bugs and everything else that is in it. So don't try, don't remember the old things. I have nothing against the dear brother.

I suppose he is dead and in heaven now. I hope he is in heaven. But the point is, you can't get to old but what you can remember, and the root will be there.

Drag it out, kill it, destroy it. Then there are the old hurts, the resentments and the hurt feelings. I tell you, I never tolerate a hurt feeling.

I don't have any hurt feelings. I can't think of anybody that I'm mad at. Are you mad at anybody? No, I'm not either.

I'm not mad at anybody. I can't think of anybody that I'm mad at. I just love everybody that I can.

I don't love them all alike. Some people I don't like, but as I've said before, you can love them without liking them. I love Crucif, but I don't like him.

I love him in the sense that I want to pray for him and ask if the grace of God could be sufficient to save even that old fellow. I don't like him, but I certainly love him enough to pray for him, because he's a human being born of a woman and who has within him the capabilities of the new birth. God could give him the new birth and make another man out of him.

I don't suppose it will ever happen, but it could. So I'm not going to quit praying for him until God gives him up or until he dies. I'm going to pray for the conversion of rulers and kings and those in authority and Secretaries and Prime Ministers and Presidents and Governors and Premiers and the rest round over the world.

I don't like all of them, but I can love them all for Christ's sake. So let's put away all hurt feelings, all resentment, and with a spade of repentance destroy the root of bitterness. And there are jealousies, I won't mention that.

There is the evil temper. How many can be defiled by an evil temper blowing up? I knew a man in the City of Chicago, well, he wasn't at that time, I think he was in Detroit. He belonged to a certain group that wore a uniform, a Christian group, and also taught that you could be eradicated so that there was no sin.

You were completely free from all, delivered perfectly from all sins, theologians call eradication. I don't know how he got in there, but he got to be pastor of an alliance church. He was preaching this, that everybody ought to get delivered so that they were completely good and sinlessly perfect.

And one night he had a board meeting, and he was crossed by one of his board members, and he blew his blessed little top and flew into a fiery rage in the board meeting. After that, I don't think he preached on that. He probably preached on his Mussolini the Antichrist, in order to escape the embarrassment of having a board member look at him and say, I remember you, Buster, in the boardroom the other night when you weren't so clean as you sound up there in the pulpit.

You don't know me here at all. You don't know me. My wife knows me better, and she doesn't know me, even though she's lived with me 43 years.

What I am in my deep heart of hearts is what I am, not what I seem to be. And if you want to be sure that you will be what you ought to be, then you must put away the root of jealousy and evil temper and pride of heart and deceit and spite and all these things. This may lie dormant for years.

I believe I mentioned once how on the farm in the early spring when it was still cold but warm enough for kids to be out stirring, the snow beginning to, as the poet said, fair ill on the top of the bare hill, and spots of bare ground were showing through. One of my brothers and I went out into the woods, and we found a beautiful little thing that looked like the lid of an Indian basket, woven beautifully, only it was perfectly flat and stiff. We picked it up and brought it into the house.

And as soon as it got warm, it uncurled and crawled off. We lugged a snake in. I can't touch a snake.

I can't do it. I can pick up toads and worms, but I hate snakes and have always had phobia for snakes, and to this day I get the shudders when I think that I actually carried in a nice little flat affair that looked like a doily, all curled up like a braided rug. And when he got warmed up, he was a snake.

You know, sir, that in the human heart it's possible if we don't watch it that we will allow that cold thing to lie there, innocent, looking enough that when it gets into a place where the heat is on, it will suddenly

uncurl and strike, and then come to stay in trouble and hurt and harm, and many are defiled. Your home can be defiled with that kind of thing. Your church can be defiled.

How many churches have blown up because one or two deacons or elders who were thought to be Saints turned out to have a cold of bitterness? Your children can lose confidence in you and never turn to Christ. It's a compliment to a man when his son will go along with Roy Laterno. It's a compliment to the Father.

I know them both. They've been in their home and slept in their home and eaten in their home. And if the Laternos hadn't been living what he preached, this boy wouldn't have been converted.

You can ruin a home by preaching one thing and living another. Well, we have but to uncover the hidden root. I said a while ago, take a spade and destroy it, but I think I'll say better, uncover it to the eyes of God, and let God do what has to be done.

Burn and destroy and he will take it out. Let no root of bitterness remain in your heart. Let it spring up and trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.

The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin, and if we walk in the Spirit, we shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. Remember those two passages. And God will take care of your root of bitterness.

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