

Battling the Unbelief of Bitterness

by John Piper

The battle against bitterness is the battle against unbelief, and we can overcome bitterness by believing the doctor's prescription is good for us, cherishing being forgiven by God, trusting God's justice will prevail, and trusting God's purpose to turn the cause of our anger for our good.

Duration: 37:05

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Romans 12:9-16, Colossians 3:8

Topics: "Overcoming Bitterness", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of believing in the prescriptions and counsel given by God. He encourages the audience to not just read the Bible, but to internalize and memorize its teachings. The speaker also highlights the significance of forgiveness and trusting in God's vengeance for those who have wronged us. Additionally, he discusses the purpose of trials in our lives, explaining that they are meant to refine and bring us closer to holiness and joy. The sermon concludes with an invitation for those struggling with bitterness or anger to stand up and trust in God's purpose for their lives. The sermon is based on Romans 12:9-21 and references 1 Peter 1:6.

Transcript

In order for the Word of Christ to dwell more richly in your hearts, you can do yourself a favor and you can honor God by turning in His Word to the text this morning, which will be part of what is the substance for Pastor John's message. It's Romans chapter 12, verses 9 through 21. Let love be genuine.

Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection.

Outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal. Be aglow with the Spirit.

Serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope. Be patient in tribulation.

Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice.

Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

Never be conceited. Repay no one for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.

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. Know if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him drink, for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. While I was down at the mid-year board meetings in Madison this week for the Baptist General Conference, one pastor confided in me that he gets angry very easily, and that he often feels a lot of anger inside that his people don't recognize at all because of his ability to keep up a good front. And I think he was speaking for a lot of us.

A lot of people are angry and keep it corked inside and it ferments. A lot of people are different than that. They blow off as soon as anything happens to them.

A lot of others turn red in the face and grip the edge of the chair and their knuckles turn white. Others become sullen and very quiet in a group and just kind of slink back out of sight. Others become very caustic and cutting with their tongue when they are angry.

Whatever way you handle or respond to this rising thing called anger, it's a universal experience and everybody has to learn to deal with it one way or the other. And most of our anger is not good. Now, I base that on James chapter 1 where it says, Be slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.

In other words, be slow to anger because most of our anger is a lot of man and very little God and does nobody any good and brings no glory to God. Most of our anger is like that. But not all of it, right? Jesus was a man without sin and according to Mark chapter 3 verse 5, he was in the synagogue and it says, He looked out upon them with grief, angered at their hardness of heart and he committed no sin.

And in Psalm 7 verse 11, it says, God is angry every day. And in Ephesians 4 26, it says, Be angry and sin not. So I conclude not all anger is bad.

In fact, some anger is very good. If it weren't there, something would be wrong with us. Morally wrong.

It's right and it's justified. But mainly the Bible warns against anger. The Bible is very suspicious of our capacity as sinful human beings to have good anger.

And therefore, mainly it says things like, Be slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God, James 1. Put away all anger and wrath and malice, Colossians 3. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor be put away from you with all malice, Ephesians 4. Now the works of the flesh are plain. Strife, jealousy, anger, Galatians 5. Everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment, Matthew 5 20. Anger is dangerous.

You see that last sentence I just read from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount? He who is angry with his brother is liable to judgment. That's dangerous. Anger is dangerous.

If you let it begin to take root and become an abiding grudge or an unforgiving spirit, it can destroy you, ultimately destroy you. That's the point of the parable in Matthew 18. Do we all know that parable of the unforgiving servant where the king has this servant who owes him ten thousand talents, which is ten

million dollars, basically.

And the king mercifully lets it go, cancels the debt. And this rascal walks out utterly unfeeling and uncherishing of this gift and strangles his friend who owes him ten dollars and won't cancel his debt. And the king hears about this and is enraged and throws this rascal into jail permanently.

And the parable closes with this warning to us, the disciples. Verse 35 of Matthew 18. So also will my heavenly Father do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

In other words, if you don't stop holding grudges, if you keep having an unforgiving spirit, you will be cast out. It's very dangerous to be angry and stay angry. It can take over your heart and dominate you and you will be judged.

Listen to this. Matthew 6, 15. If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive you your trespasses.

Now, to let that have its appropriate impact, we've got to break that down into three statements. Statement number one, no one goes to heaven unforgiven by God. Heaven is a place for forgiven sinners, not unforgiven sinners.

Statement number two, no one is forgiven by God who will not be forgiving. Matthew 6, 15. Statement number three, therefore, no one who is unforgiving goes to heaven.

Jesus treats anger the same way he treated lust last week. We said very plainly from Matthew 5, 29. If you don't fight lust, you don't go to heaven.

And today, we say exactly the same words from Matthew 6, 15. If you don't fight grudges, you don't go to heaven. Is salvation then by works? The question comes back again and the answer is the same every week.

No, salvation is by grace through faith. And the opposite of salvation, judgment, is by works through what? What's the opposite of faith? Unbelief. The pathway that leads to salvation is the grace of God trusting in the promises of God.

And the pathway that leads to judgment is the performance of works disbelieving in the promises of God. Therefore, when Jesus said, if you don't forgive those who sin against you, you'll go to judgment, he meant an unforgiving spirit is an unbelieving spirit. An unforgiving spirit is an unbelieving spirit.

And therefore, the fight against bitterness is the fight against unbelief. About 18 years ago, when I was still in seminary, I was in a kind of 20-20 group with some other couples with Noel. And I can remember one night that became so tense because one of the young wives said that she would not forgive her mother for what happened to her as a girl.

And we all just kind of gulped. And we talked for about an hour about the commands to forgive. And we talked about the forgiveness of God towards us in our sin.

And she was adamant. Never will I ever be able to forgive her. And so I said to her, I said, don't you realize that if you're unwilling to forgive your mother, God will be unwilling to forgive your sins and you won't go to heaven? Didn't faze her.

She was not the kind of person who is governed by principle or by the word. She was emotion driven. And this feeling of indignation in her justified itself.

Absolutely. It was impervious to biblical warnings. And the reason that she was in danger of losing her soul is not because she wasn't working hard enough for God, but because she was not trusting God to work hard enough for her to take care of this wrong that she had experienced.

The battle against bitterness is a battle against unbelief. And the peace, which is the opposite of bitterness, is clearly shown in Romans 15, 13 to be by believing. Peace replaces bitterness by faith.

So my aim this morning now, in the time we have left, is to show you from scripture four ways to battle the unbelief of bitterness. But I want to pray before I go on and have you unite with me in your heart to ask God to come in these last 20 minutes or so and really work because there are a lot of people in this room with a lot of bitterness and a lot of anger. Let's pray.

Lord, I don't get anger and bitterness out of anybody's heart. Only you do. And you are gloriously willing and eager and able.

The instrument of your healing and your deliverance from the bondage of grudges and bitterness is your word, its promises and its counsels. And so we pray as a people right now that your Holy Spirit would empower your word and that there would be great works of deliverance before this hour is over. Oh God, grant, I pray, that you would give us ears to hear and miraculous responsiveness.

In Jesus' name, amen. Four ways to fight the unbelief that is beneath bitterness. Number one, believe that what the good physician prescribes is good for you.

Believe that what the good physician prescribes is good for you. He prescribes in Colossians 3, 8, put away anger. Put away anger.

It's like the doctor saying, put away coffee. You just have to believe him. I mean, if you believe him, you'll do it.

If you don't believe him, you won't. Now I want to illustrate this with Leroy Jarns, great minister with the Navigators. He tells a story of his conversion and his anger in those early days.

Let me read it for you. Take this out of his book, *The Cost of, not The Cost of Discipleship, The Lost Art of Discipleship*. Shortly after I became a Christian, I was challenged to make personal applications as part of my weekly Bible study.

One of the first books I studied was Paul's letter to the Colossians. As I was studying chapter three, the Holy Spirit caught my attention with this verse. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language.

I tried to slide past this verse, but the Spirit kept bringing me back to the words put off anger. At the time I had a violent temper and whenever it flared up, I would haul off and bash my fist into the nearest door. In spite of the fact that I often bloodied my knuckles and on one occasion had completely smashed a beautiful diamond and onyx ring that my wife had given me, I couldn't seem to stop.

And yet, here was God's word, put off anger. It was clear to me that this was not just some good advice given to the people at Colossae centuries ago, it was God speaking to me at the moment, who was the

counsel of the good physician. So that week I made a covenant with God.

And I'm going to give you a chance at the end of this service to make a covenant with God. You'll be praying about this, whether you want to do this. He had spoken to me about my sin of anger and I promised the Lord I was going to work on it.

My first step was to memorize the verse and review it daily for a number of weeks. In other words, the doctor's advice on his prescription was not thrown in a waste can. It was used, taken to the drugstore and cashed in on the memory.

I prayed and asked the Lord to bring this verse to mind whenever a situation arose where I might be tempted to lose my temper. And I asked my wife to pray for me and remind me of that passage if she saw me failing in my promise to the Lord. So Colossians 3:8 became a part of my life and gradually God removed that sin from me.

The fellow stopped me at the door after the first service and said with a big broad smile on his face, he said, I just want you to know there's another testimony exactly like that. I used to be so full of anger and so quick on the trigger and God has changed me. So the first way is simply believe the doctor's prescription is good for you when you read it in the Bible.

Don't pass over it. Go on to the next one and say, oh, I like this one. I like this one.

This says rejoice in the Lord. I like this one. But it but if the doctor says no more, no more drinking at the cup of of anger.

Just believe him. It's good advice. Now that doesn't solve the whole problem.

That's step number one. Here's number two. Cherish being forgiven by God.

Cherish being forgiven by God. Ephesians 4:32 says, be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another. That's the opposite of grudges.

Forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you. Now, the point of that verse is that being forgiven by God is going to have some amazing impact on your capacity to forgive other people. And so if I were to ask you right now, but what's the link between being forgiven by God and being a forgiving person? I wonder what we'd answer.

I hope we would all answer faith on cue faith. But that woman 18 years ago, subsequently whose marriage has fallen to pieces, that woman believed she was forgiven with all her heart. And that was the justification of her grudge.

Something's wrong here, you see. And what's wrong is this. Defining saving faith as the simple belief in your head that God forgave you is wrong.

That's not the definition of saving faith. All kinds of people can be deluded into thinking they've been forgiven by God for all kinds of wrong reasons. What is saving faith then? Saving faith is believing that being forgiven by God is an awesome thing.

That's what saving faith is. Saving faith is looking at the forgiveness of God, looking at the horror of my sin, and being staggered by the thought that I am forgiven. That's saving faith.

Not just the simple conviction in the head, my sins are forgiven because Jesus died for me. That's not saving faith. You can go right on cruising in your life of unforgiveness and a grudge and justify it by believing you're forgiven.

If you're not stunned by being forgiven. If you don't cherish being forgiven. You see, faith is a union with Christ that is overwhelmed with the impossible thought that I can be forgiven by a holy God.

And when you're ravished by it, when you look at the forgiveness of God towards you and it staggers you, stuns you, silences you, awes you, wraps you up, then it becomes a psychological impossibility to turn towards those who've wronged you and say, but I'm not going to pass it on to you. You can't do it. It is a psychological impossibility to cherish the beauty of being forgiven and then not to share it with those who've wronged you.

There is a link. The battle against bitterness is the battle against unbelief. But belief is not a mere head conviction that Christ forgave you.

But a heart conviction that that is the most awesome thing you've ever experienced. Third, the third way to battle unbelief of bitterness is to trust that God's justice will prevail. To trust, to believe that God's justice will prevail.

Now, I think all of us in this room know from experience that one of the causes of bitterness is being wronged, really wronged by somebody. They lied about us. They stole from us.

They were unfaithful to us or they let us down or they rejected us. And we feel not only that it shouldn't have happened to us, we didn't do anything to deserve that, but they should be punished. And you know what? You're right.

Many times you're right. And it's precisely the rightness of it that just chews inside. I'm right.

I'm right. They should not get off so easy after what they said or after what they did. And it's the rightness of it, being in the right, that just chews away inside and can destroy you.

Now, what do you do with that when you're right? God isn't pleased with your gnawing, chewing sense of bitterness and anger inside. And the reason he's not is because it comes from an unbelief in his promise to settle accounts for you. Let's go to chapter 12 of Romans, verse 19.

That's what was read earlier. This is the only point I'm going to take out of those verses, but it's probably for many of us the most important one of the morning. Romans 12, 19.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God or give place to the wrath of God. Why? See, there's the prescription from the doctor. Now, what basis, doctor, do you give me for this being a wise therapy? Answer, a promise.

For it is written, vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord. What that text says is that God has made a promise that he will repay those who have wronged you in a perfect measure.

His justice will prevail. Have you ever thought, as you compare yourself as a candidate for vengeance and God as a candidate for taking vengeance, who would make the best of it? Consider God for a minute. No wrong that has ever been committed against you, not in the darkest hour of any night, has ever been missed.

It is written in a book in heaven. He knows every wrong committed against you. Two, he sees the evil of the wrong far better than you see it.

Three, he hates the evil of the wrong 10,000 times more purely and righteously than you hate the evil of the wrong. Four, he claims the right to settle accounts for you. And the big issue then is, do you believe he will? Do you trust him when the wrong comes and you're really wrong and they're really wrong and you're right and all your moral indignation rightly cries out no to this.

Are you willing rather than to let that fester and seethe and chew at your insides? Are you willing to believe the promise when it comes? Look, is God talking? I saw it. You're right. They're wrong.

And I hate what they did to you. Now, you give me that anger. I'm going to settle this for you and I will settle it better than you could ever settle it.

Justice will prevail. Do you trust me? That's the word of God to us this morning if we're holding on to a grudge. What do you do with it? You do what Jesus did.

Have you ever put yourself at the foot of the cross at that moment and considered the ripoff that Jesus Christ got? Consider it. Nobody in this world has ever been wronged like Jesus has been wronged. Nobody in this world has ever gotten a raw deal like Jesus got from his contemporaries.

Nobody has ever been abused more than Jesus was abused. Nobody has ever been rejected more deeply than Jesus was rejected and nobody was more undeserving of it all or innocent than Jesus. Now, what did he do with it? Did Jesus not feel anything? Did he just say, Oh, it doesn't matter.

Oh, it doesn't count. Oh, I don't feel anything. That's not the way Jesus responded.

Jesus felt it all. He felt every bit as much pain as you've ever felt. And he was angry.

He hates sin. But what did he do with it? According to first Peter 2, 23, when he was reviled, he did not revile in return. And when he suffered, he did not threaten.

But here it is. He handed over to him who judges justly. Why did he do that? Why did he take all the righteous and moral indignation that came up in his heart for all the sins that were directed against him? And instead of keeping it inside and seething with it and lashing out with it, just empty it right into the hands of the judge.

Why did he do that? He did it because he had become one of us, weak, human, frail, and he wanted to set an example of what we should do with it. And what we should do with it is to gather it all up and then to hand it over to the judge who judges justly. Maybe this will stick in your mind.

Or try another one. If you hold a grudge, you slight the judge. Or try another one.

If you hold a grudge, you doubt the judge. Finally, number four, the way to battle unbelief and bitterness is to trust God's purpose to turn the cause of your anger, the cause of your anger, for your good. To trust the purpose of God to turn the cause of your anger for your good.

Now, take this from 1 Peter 1, verse 6, which says, For a little while you may have to suffer various trials in order that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold, which though perishable is tested by fire, might redound unto praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Here's what that text

says. God allows trials to come into your life.

Now, a trial is anything that tends to make you angry. If it didn't tend to make you angry, it wouldn't be a trial. What's to be tried? A trial is something that tends to make you angry, either at God or at people.

So these trials are allowed, it says, why? To treat your faith like a refiner treats gold. What God is after in your life, more than he's after anything else, is genuine faith. So the faith in our lives, every one of our lives, no matter how far along you are in the process of sanctification, every single person in this room has sullied faith.

It's got dross in the metal. And therefore, God allows us to be put in a crucible. You know what a crucible is from chemistry class.

And then the heat comes and the metal pops in the crucible. And at that moment, you've got a choice to make, and it's a choice of faith. Will you give way to unbelief and shake your fist in God's face or in people's face and say, I didn't deserve this and I won't tolerate it? Or will you yield to the promise of first Peter one where God says, look, my purpose is your dross to consume.

Your faith to refine. Let me sum up where we've been. Number one.

Believe that the great physician gives good prescriptions. Don't take his prescriptions out of the Bible and stuff them into your back pocket. Put them right into your head.

Turn them into memory. Believe that he gives good counsel when he says put away anger. Second, believe that you are forgiven in the sense that you believe that being forgiven is an awesome thing.

Third, believe that vengeance belongs to God and that God will repay everybody who has ever wronged you in far greater measure than you ever could. And fourth, believe that God's purpose in all your trials is for your good, that all the causes of anger he will turn for your refinement and holiness and joy. Now, here's the way we're going to close our service.

I'm going to give an opportunity in just a minute for some people to stand up. But I don't want everybody to stand up. So I'm going to define very clearly who I want to stand up.

If you are battling some temptation to bitterness, some temptation to anger. Maybe it's recent. Maybe this week something just walloped you up the side of the head.

Maybe it happened 20 years ago and you've had it all brought to the surface again this week. I'm talking about people who are in the war with me now and who have this on the front burner of their warfare this morning. I'm going to give you a few minutes or a few seconds to think about whether you want to stand and what you'd be doing in standing is this.

You would be saying to God, to us, I make a covenant right now that I'm going to take what I've learned this morning and go to battle afresh against bitterness in my life. And two, I would like you, Pastor John, to pray for me this morning along with the others. Think about it, whether you'd like to stand.

Let's bow. And then I'll give you an opportunity in just a second. If you want to make that resolution with the Lord and want me to pray for you right now, would you just stand to your feet, please? All right, let's go to prayer now for those especially.

All of us unite our hearts. Father, you see these children of yours, these people who are hungry for your spirit and your power in their lives in this particular area of anger and bitterness and the temptations that are coming against them. And we unite our hearts right now to resist the evil one who shoots against them with his arrows of bitterness that you would put a shield of protection around them.

Give them an uncommon ability to take the sword of the spirit and the shield of faith this week and protect themselves and grant that by your Holy Spirit, they would right now, even as I pray, feel the burden being lifted as they revel in what it means to be forgiven by almighty God. May there be a sweet peace that comes over them and a new strength and ability to leave this room delivered of grudge and a new healing of relationships, Lord, and a new ability to bear witness unencumbered by this nagging anger. O Lord God, use this worship setting with the prayers of hundreds of your people ascending right now in the silence of their hearts to deliver us from the bondage of anger, the bondage of bitterness, the bondage of grudges.

For we ask it in the name of our great Savior, Jesus Christ. And all the people said, Amen.

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