

Fight the Good Fight: Bitterness

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We've been looking at practical strategies to overcome the things we commonly struggle with. We started by looking at the two main reasons we struggle, lack of knowledge and unbelief, and from that we developed our general threefold strategy; learn God's word, believe God's word, and preach God's word to ourselves. Informed by this we have explored struggles with despondency, with anxiety, and with shame.

Last week when we looked deeper into struggles with shame we saw that the key to victory lay in focusing in faith on the fullness of the forgiveness that is ours through the cross of Christ. For as much as we may struggle with shame stemming from persistent unbelief in our own forgiveness, and we do, we probably all struggle even more when it comes to forgiving others. It is easy to hold grudges against others because the wrong we have suffered is usually real and it often can be quite significant. Wrong is wrong and the pain we suffer from being wronged is real so we tend to feel justified in holding a grudge against the person who hurt us. Once we reach the point of being self-justified in our holding of grudges we at best expect the offending party to earn our forgiveness, and at worst we are completely unwilling to ever forgive. If we do muster the strength to forgive it is essential that the forgiveness be genuine. We must be careful to not deceive ourselves with the false-hearted notion that we will forgive but not forget. If we are unwilling to forget the wrong committed against us then we have not truly forgiven in spite of what we might say. In forgiving us for our wrongs committed against him, God has not only forgiven our sins, he has forgotten them;

^{NAS} **Isaiah 43:25** "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.

^{NAS} **Hebrews 8:12** "For I will be merciful to their iniquities, And I will remember their sins no more."

Refusing to forgive results in resentment which in time grows into bitterness. As hard as forgiving others can be we must remember God does not call us to do anything without equipping us to succeed. Today, as we continue our look at practical strategies for overcoming our struggles we should remind ourselves of what we as Christians are called to (1 Tim. 6:12) and why it is that we will ultimately succeed (Phil. 2:13): "Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called ... for God is the working one in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure". With that in mind, today we will look at how to fight the good fight of faith against bitterness.

Although as Christians we have an obligation to forgive others, the remedy for bitterness is not focusing on *why* we should forgive others but how we *can* forgive them. With that said, it would do us well to remind ourselves of why we should forgive.

We should forgive others because it is an obligation imposed upon us by the very one who gave himself for us and our forgiveness upon the cross;

^{NAS} **Matthew 5:38** "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ "But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the

other also ...⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you⁴⁵ in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous ...⁴⁸ "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

We should forgive others because as Jesus points out, there are consequences for not doing so;

^{NIV} **Matthew 6:14** For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

We should forgive others out of gratitude for what Christ has done for us;

^{NAS} **Ephesians 4:31** Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.³² And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Although these are reasons why we should obey God in general, and forgive in particular, they don't work particularly well as a driving force for good conduct. Especially in the case of someone who has done us significant wrong, these show us our obligation to forgive, but they do not empower us to follow through on our obligation. John Piper clarifies this point when he writes;

" What gives so much force to the impulse of anger in such cases is the overwhelming sense that the offender does not deserve forgiveness. That is, the grievance is so deep and so justifiable that not only does self-righteousness strengthen our indignation, but so does a legitimate sense of moral outrage. It's the deep sense of legitimacy that gives our bitterness its unbending compulsion. We feel that a great crime would be committed if the magnitude of the evil we've experienced were just dropped and we let bygones be bygones. We are torn: our moral sense says this evil cannot be ignored and the word of God says we must forgive."

This leaves us facing a paradox which Edward John Carnell noted when he wrote;

"We cannot ignore inconsiderate acts in others; yet *we cannot execute* the penalty of law. We have no right to complete the moral cycle . . . Although we sense no spiritual inhibition against crying out against injustice, *the purity of our moral life deteriorates the moment* we attempt to administer justice."

As we've seen time and again, going back to our look at the Exodus story, in difficult times and circumstances the only driving force strong enough to help us press on in obedience is faith in God's future grace and that is no different in our battle with bitterness.

We've learned the two main reasons we struggle with anything are lack of knowledge and persistent unbelief. We'll find what we need to fight back in faith against bitterness in Nahum 1:1-8 where we learn how we *can* forgive those who wrong us.

To find strength and motivation to fight back against bitterness from Nahum 1:1-8 we need to consider the historical context. Nahum the prophet delivers his oracle against Nineveh;

^{NIV} **Nahum 1:1** An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.

Likely this was written somewhere between 664 BC and 612 BC and is a message of judgment against Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. This form of prophetic speech is known formally as an *Oracle against the Nations*. Such speeches however were not delivered to the nation of mention, they were delivered to the people of Israel. Therefore, although they were oracles of judgment *against* the enemies of God's people they were in reality oracles of salvation *to* God's people. In proclaiming the judgment of Assyria to the Israelites, the prophet was really proclaiming the salvation of God's people.

In 721 BC Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and carried the 10 northern tribes away forever. In 701 BC the Assyrian king Sennacherib destroyed much of the southern kingdom of Judah taking 200,150 captive. Sennacherib was not kind to his captives, often leading them away by ropes attached with hooks either through the lips or nose. Discussing the history of the Assyrians, one archaeologist said this;

"It is as gory and bloodcurdling a history as we know."

An historian adds these details;

The ancient Assyrians were extremely severe. Their punishments included dismemberment (cutting off limbs, ears, nose, lips, castration, etc.), impalement upon a stake, they also forced their captives to hard labor. Rebellious cities prisoners of war were flayed (skinned) alive, blinded, or had their tongues torn out; they were impaled, burned, and put to death in other ways.

There have been no greater atrocities committed in human history than those of the Assyrians, they have perhaps been matched but not exceeded. The audience of Nahum, the people of Judah, were victims of these atrocities and so they have been victimized by wrongs so heinous they exceed the bounds of human imagination.

Nahum opens with these words of reassurance;

^{NIV} **Nahum 1:2** The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. ³ The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished ...

God has seen the atrocities of the Assyrians and he will execute vengeance for his covenant people. Nahum follows these words of reassurance with a giant message of comfort;

^{NIV} **Nahum 1:3** ... His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. ⁴ He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. ⁵ The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. ⁶ Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him. ⁷ The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, ⁸ but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of *Nineveh*; he will pursue his foes into darkness.

Notice that the promise of coming wrath against the Assyrians is really a promise of salvation for God's people and therefore is ultimately a promise of future grace. God loves us, is good to us, and offers us comfort and safety in him in times of trouble;

^{NIV} **Nahum 1:7** The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him,

This is a theme echoed throughout the Psalms;

^{NAS} **Psalms 46:1** ... God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble.

^{NAS} **Psalms 91:1** He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. ² I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!"

^{ESV} **Psalms 27:5** For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.

^{NAS} **Psalms 62:6** He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be shaken. ⁷ On God my salvation and my glory *rest*; The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God.

^{NAS} **Psalms 84:11** For the LORD God is a sun and shield; The LORD gives grace and glory; No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.

God loves his people and in due time he will administer justice to those who wrong us;

^{NIV} **Nahum 1:2** The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. ³ The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished ...

This ultimately is the truth we can use to fight back against bitterness and to forgive those who wrong us, no matter how big the wrong;

^{NAS} **Romans 12:14** Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. ¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

John Piper nicely sums this concept up as follows;

God's promise says, "Yes, an outrage has been committed against you. Yes, it deserves to be severely punished. Yes, the person has not yet experienced that punishment. But, No, you may not be the one to punish, and you may not go on relishing personal retribution. Why? Because God will see to it that justice is done. God will repay. You cannot improve on his justice. He sees every angle of the evil done against you — far better than you can see it. His justice will be more thorough than any justice you could administer. "If you hold a grudge, you doubt the Judge."

When we leave matters of justice to God, and when we believe that he will in his own time deliver justice, then we are freed in faith to not only forgive but also to love those who wrong us.

There is one special case we must still consider. What happens if we are wronged by a Christian, in which case the promise of God's vengeance and wrath does not apply? In that case we must turn directly to the cross.

^{NAS} **Colossians 2:13** And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, ¹⁴ having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us *and* which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

This reminds us of the words of Daniel Whittle in the opening verse of *I Know Whom I Have Believed*;

I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.

When we are wronged by a fellow Christian we only suffer *because* of the sin of that person against us but on the cross Christ suffered *for* their sin against us. For as great as our suffering may be because of that wrong against us, Christ bore on the cross infinitely greater suffering for that exact same wrong. If he can cancel their certificate of debt for that very sin, then how much more should we?

To conclude, when people wrong us the wrong is real, our pain is real, and the offending party truly deserves to be brought to justice and pay in full for their wrong. However, it is not our place to attempt to deliver that justice, nor are we free to hold a grudge against them. As much as it runs contrary to our nature, we are called not only to forgive them but to love them.

We fight the unbelief of bitterness not by pretending we were not wronged but by turning the wrong over to God in faith, trusting that he will bring about much more perfect justice than we ever could. Only this can free us to move forward in faith, living out that to which we were called;

^{NAS} **Ephesians 4:31** Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Finding strength in this fact;

^{NIV} **Nahum 1:7** The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him,