

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 2, 2014**

**WHAT GOD WANTS (4):
REMOVING THE ROOTS OF BITTERNESS**

Hebrews 12:14-17

THE CHARACTER OF MERCY

Last Sunday, while I was making a special guest appearance in Children's Church, Pastor David preached on "The Character of Mercy" as it is seen in Genesis 3, in God's response to the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Their act of disobedience had consequences, of course, on several different levels, as Pastor David pointed out. Because of their sin, God pronounced judgment on Adam and Eve and banished them from the paradise of Eden. But God also showed mercy to our first parents by providing garments for them to cover their nakedness. He didn't have to do that. But the magnificent beauty of God's character is revealed as He tempered His justice with mercy.

The essence of mercy, as Pastor David said, is that it is undeserved. Adam and Eve did not deserve mercy. No one deserves mercy. By definition, by its very nature, mercy, like grace, is undeserved. Yet this is how God treats His people. He does not ignore the demands of His own justice. 'Just-ness' is as much a part of God's character as mercy and grace. God *is* just. God *loves* justice and calls us to *do* justice and to *work for* justice whenever there is injustice in the world. But in His dealings with us, God tempers His justice with mercy and grace. And Genesis 3 shows us that He did so from the very beginning. The qualities of grace and mercy were not later "add-ons" to the character of God. He was full of grace and mercy not only from the beginning, but from before the beginning of time, from before the foundation of the world, from all eternity.

Before you go to bed tonight, set aside a few moments to ponder this truth, which is very, very good news for us, and give thanks and praise to God for His mercy and grace, which are given free of charge to people who don't deserve either mercy or grace, and never will. Which describes all of us.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Two weeks ago we looked at the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), who serves as a model for us of what it means to "love mercy" (Micah 6:8). In telling the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus showed that our "neighbor" is anyone in need. The "neighbor" to whom we are to show mercy and kindness is anyone in need whom we have the ability and opportunity to help. The Samaritan incarnated the quality of mercy by putting his own life at risk to show compassion and loving kindness to the man who had been beaten and robbed and left half-dead by the side of the road. In doing so, the Samaritan showed us what it is to be a neighbor to someone in need.

What does Jesus say to us at the end of the story? “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). Why? Because to love mercy in this way by putting it into action pleases God. To love mercy the way God wants us to love mercy involves getting involved in the lives of others.

A DIFFERENT ANGLE

Today, as we turn our attention to this brief passage of Scripture in Hebrews 12, I want us to see mercy from a different angle. As seen in the story of the Good Samaritan, mercy is a caring, compassionate response that moves a person to help someone in need (*Revell Bible Dictionary*). But there is more to the character of mercy. Mercy is also expressed in the act of forgiving others. To be unwilling to forgive, to have an unforgiving spirit, is to allow a “bitter root” or a “root of bitterness” to take hold in your heart (12:15). If that root of bitterness is unchecked – in fact, if it is not pulled up and out, roots and all, it will produce the fruit of bitterness, anger, resentment, discord, envy, and malice in your life. It will, as it says in verse 15, grow up to cause heap big trouble in your life and relationships and defile or poison many. You know it is true. You know how poisonous, how cancerous a heart full of bitterness or an unforgiving spirit can be. If you don’t know it yet, if you live long enough, you will.

Generally speaking, verses 14-17 contain instructions for living as followers of Christ in both the church and the world. The unnamed author of the letter to the Hebrews, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wants his readers (including us) to understand that we who are God’s people are to live like we are God’s people. We are not to take our cues or values or standards from the world around us. We are not to imitate the world or just go with the flow of our culture. Instead, as Paul says in Ephesians 5:1, we are to “be imitators of God.” We are to take our cues from God and His Word.

PURSUE PEACE AND HOLINESS

What does this mean for us in practical terms as the people of God? Through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, what does God want from us? Notice first of all that verse 14 says we are to pursue peace with others and holiness with God. Peace, of course, is a two-way street. It is not possible for two people or two nations to live at peace with each other if one is constantly and intentionally provoking the other. Some people (and some nations) are hard to get along with. People can be mean and selfish. And many are. They can be insensitive and disrespectful. They can be greedy and pushy. They can be consumed with anger and filled with bitterness.

Followers of Christ, however, are not to be this way. As Paul says in Ephesians 4, we are to “get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” Instead, we are to “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave (us)” (4:31-32). Followers of Christ are to pursue peace with everyone, understanding that peace is not always possible. Paul lays down the principle in Romans 12:18: “If it is possible,” he says, “as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Followers of Christ must not allow seeds of bitterness, resentment, anger, malice,

contentiousness, greed, arrogance, or unforgiveness to take root in our hearts and choke the crop of peace.

Second, followers of Christ in this world are to pursue holiness with God. “Holiness,” applied to God, refers to God’s absolute moral perfection – in fact, His perfection in every way, without defect, fault, blemish, or limitation. As applied to us, though, holiness means something different. To be holy is to be set apart for God, set apart by God Himself for His use, set apart by God to serve His purposes and to bring glory to His name. It means that we are to be different from the world. We *must* be different from the world. Though we are *in* the world, the kingdom of which we are citizens is not *of* this world. Followers of Christ must remember that we are set apart by God for His purposes. We belong to Him. It is our duty and privilege to take our cues and directions from Him, not from this world in all of its confusion, deception, and rebellion.

MAKE SURE NO ONE MISSES THE GRACE OF GOD

In the first part of verse 15, we are given the instruction to look out for each other, to watch over and care for one another so that no one misses out on the grace of God. The verse begins with a form of the Greek verb *episkopeo*, which comes from the noun *episkopos*, meaning “overseer” or “bishop.” (It is virtually synonymous with the word *presbuteros*, which means “elder.”) We are to watch over and watch out for one another, so that no one in the fellowship of the church fails to grasp the meaning of the gospel and walks away, turning his or her back on the gift of God’s amazing grace. God is not stingy with His grace. He is generous. More than generous. He offers us all the grace we can ever need, if we will just open our hearts to receive it.

Make sure *you* don’t miss out on the grace of God. Make sure you don’t play games with God and trifle with His grace. Keep watch over the well-being of your soul. And look out for the well-being of each other’s souls.

NO ROOTS OF BITTERNESS

In addition to the tragedy of missing out on God’s grace, verse 15 warns us against allowing any poisonous roots of bitterness to grow up and cause trouble. This image of bitter roots comes from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, from the message Moses delivered to the nation of Israel shortly before they were to cross the Jordan River and enter the land God had promised to give them. In Deuteronomy 29:18, Moses gives this warning: “Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.”

UNFORGIVENESS

There is another root of bitterness, of course, which I have already mentioned – the bitter root of an unforgiving spirit that will poison your soul and your relationships.

I've got to wrap this up, because we have an important date at the Lord's Table today, but let me tell you in closing what happens when you allow bitterness toward God or anyone to put down roots in your heart. By letting bitterness take root and grow in your life, you block the flow of God's forgiving grace in your life. You cut yourself off from the flow of God's mercy. If you harbor an unforgiving attitude in your heart and refuse to forgive anyone who sins against you, you're in big trouble, because Jesus said if you won't forgive others when they sin against you, you can't expect God to forgive your sins (Matthew 6:15).

In other words, if you want God to forgive you, forgive others. If you want to be forgiven, be a forgiver. If you want to receive mercy from God, be merciful to others. If you refuse to show mercy to others, don't expect God to be merciful to you.

Harboring a bitter, unforgiving spirit is like choosing to live in a minefield, knowing it could blow up and destroy you at any moment. Bitterness is a spiritual cancer that can take over your life, if you let it. It is a corrosive acid that can eat away at your soul until there is nothing left, if you refuse to let go of it. Anne Lamott said it is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. If you drink the bitter poison of unforgiveness, if you hold onto resentment and bitterness in your heart against someone, you will be the biggest loser – which, unlike the TV show with that name, is not a good thing. Sure, you may do serious damage to the object of your bitterness. And there will probably be collateral damage in other relationships. But the person you hurt the most will be you.

Bitterness or unforgiveness alienates parents from children, and children from parents. It causes brothers and sisters to be estranged. It divides husbands from wives, and wives from husbands. It damages, even destroys relationships between friends, neighbors, teammates, business partners, co-workers, and fellow Christians.

Maybe you have been betrayed by someone, and forgiveness seems out of the question. Maybe someone said something or did something that hurt you deeply, and you are too hurt, or too angry to forgive. Maybe you're holding onto resentment or nursing a grudge over something that happened a long, long time ago, like the 73-year-old man in South Dakota who held a grudge toward a high school classmate over a locker room prank that took place more than 50 years ago. The root of bitterness planted that day led ultimately to murder more than 50 years later, when the man who would not forgive shot and killed the man who had humiliated him as a teenager.

Do not let your hurt, whatever it is, become hate. Do not allow the roots of bitterness to take hold in your heart and take over your heart. The act of forgiving will set you free. And it will once again allow the river of God's mercy and grace to flow freely in your life.

Pursue peace with others and holiness with God. Don't miss out on the grace of God. And don't allow the roots of bitterness or unforgiveness to take hold in your life.

Lord, let it be so in us, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.