



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

THE ENEMIES OF THE SOUL

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ APRIL 3, 2022

— BITTERNESS —

Many of you have observed that through these past several Sundays in Lent the pastoral staff has been offering a series of messages called “The Enemies of the Soul.” This morning’s enemy is that insidious, vile, corrosive enemy: bitterness. It can eat away at our soul and can rob us of our joy; it can grow like mold or rust if it is not dealt with speedily and completely. It is very much a blessing, and our Scripture lesson for this morning teaches us to allow the Holy Spirit to create in us such a spiritual condition or atmosphere that bitterness never has a chance to take root in the first place. A disciple of Jesus tends to his or her soul to give these enemies about which we have been talking very little opportunity to take us to dark places. If they do appear on our radar screen, they are quickly dispensed with because of who we are in Christ.

It is especially important at the outset to recognize that bitterness is something to which we **choose** to hold on. Often, we may think that it is just natural, something that just happens. The problem is that it is a choice we make, to hold onto hurts that have intruded into our lives. But we don’t have to. Some folks have said to me, “Steven, I am justified in being angry. I have every right to be bitter.” Perhaps ... but the problem is that in their self-justification they choose to hold onto that bitterness for a very long time. I have known people who have been angry and bitter for over 30 years!

Brokenness may have caused a hurt recently or long ago; you can hold onto that bitterness if you want to. You can live that way if you

want to, but how is that working out for you? What kind of life do you have if you carry a burden of bitterness, whether for a short time or for decades?

No Room for Bitterness

The Scripture tells us there is a much better way to live! Instead of letting bitterness take root, let your heart and soul be grounded in Jesus as His disciple. You will find that there is no room for bitterness. His way is always the best way. Look at our Scripture for today, which comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 25-32.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with any-one in need. ²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Prior to this passage, Paul gives us an analysis, a lesson, on how people change. Paul teaches a three-step process. At the very beginning, he says to “put off the old self” (Ephesians 4:22). When we recognize that there is something in our lives—a habit or something in our spirit or our soul which needs to be exorcised—we should make the commitment to change. For example, “I need to stop being so impatient” or “I need to stop using [expletives deleted]” or “I need to stop my addiction to sugar” or whatever it is. We make this commitment because we recognize that there is something in our spirit, something in our soul, which is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. We need to put off the old self.

Great first step! The problem is that too many people stop there. They make the commitment, but nothing changes. Why is that? It is because over a prolonged period they have trained themselves to default to that habit. With repetition, it becomes their default mode.

My wife Nanette has been a music teacher for well over 40 years and she teaches her students to forget the myth that “practice makes perfect.” **Practice does not make perfect; practice makes permanent!** Only **perfect practice makes perfect**. What do I mean? If a violin student is holding the instrument incorrectly and drawing the bow incorrectly and keeps practicing in the same way, all that student is doing is training his or her motor memory to play incorrectly—practice makes permanent.

We do the same thing with our spirit, with our emotions, with any part of our life. Over time, we train ourselves to go down a certain road—our default mode—and until some intentional intervention, some additional step, we just keep doing those things. Even though we have made a commitment to be rid of a bad habit, we may have trained ourselves for a long time to indulge in that habit. So as soon as something happens, boom! Out it comes.

Paul says there are additional steps. The second step is to **be renewed in the spirit of your mind**. We must learn to think about things differently. For instance, if this bad habit is bad language, we must ask ourselves why we gave ourselves permission all these years to speak that way. Why did we give ourselves permission to indulge in sugar without limits? Why do we give ourselves permission to be impatient with other people? How about language, which is one of the examples Paul gives later? We might think, “Well, everyone talks that way.” That is a rationale; not everyone talks that way, and even if they did, they shouldn’t. “It’s good for emphasis; it makes me look cool to use that kind of language.” These are all rationales—these are all lies, they are untrue. In fact, not everybody speaks that way and sometimes other people are offended by it and push such speakers away. It does not make us look cool at all. Why would we want our loved ones...why would we want Almighty

God... to hear this filth coming from our mouths? We must renew our minds; we must think about it differently as the second step.

The third step, then, is to **put on the new self**. We must replace it with something else. Like violin students, if we have taught ourselves to do something incorrectly, we now must intentionally replace that action with something else in a very conscious way. Every time we take the instrument out of the case, we must hold it correctly 20 times—hold it correctly, put it down; hold it correctly, put it down. Through repetition, we learn new habits. As a result, we “put off the old self” (Ephesians 4:22), renew the thinking of our minds, and then “put on the new self” (Ephesians 4:24).

What does Paul do with this? He says this new self has no use for what is false. “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth to his neighbor, because we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:25). In Christ, we are committed to the truth—His truth, not the world’s truth. We must renew our minds, and orient ourselves to Christ’s truth, not the world’s truth. So, a life principle for engaging with others would be, “I seek what He says is right, not what I might want to be right.”

Friends, we have a common bond in Jesus; we are one body. We are one of another, we must renew our minds and think, “Who is this other person? I am a part of this person in Christ; we are the Body of Christ and in a common bond. Why would we want to languish in untruth and brokenness? Why do we want to create that kind of condition, that kind of atmosphere, because as Christians we are one of another?” If we are dealing with non-Christians, what kind of witness do we project when they observe an untruth? By untruth, I mean non-Christlike ways. God is not glorified or served by our distortions of what Jesus says is right. If we are committed to the truth—His truth—there is **no room for bitterness**.

The key to this whole passage is in verses 26 and 27. Listen to what Paul says: “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” He first acknowl-

edges that within life there are some things about which it is worth getting angry. What is happening in Ukraine makes us angry, human trafficking, child abuse, and those kinds of things make us angry. Jesus got angry; God gets angry. Remember, it made Jesus angry that the temple was being abused—not just the temple itself, but the people who came in to fulfill their spiritual responsibilities were being taken advantage of, and that made Jesus angry. The issue is not so much that there are things worth getting angry about, but what we do with that anger.

There are healthy ways of dealing with anger and unhealthy ways. The unhealthy ways cause further hurt; they are destructive—sometimes self-destructive—and can lead to bitterness. By contrast, healthy ways result in a changed motivation out of obedience to Christ. Instead of it being all about us and our anger and desire to lash out, that motivation changes to be about others; that angry energy can be transformed into the motivation to build up, heal broken-ness, and bring positive change. If you are angry, what are you going to do about it? How are you going to do it? It can be a witness of how things ought to be and can be rather than how they are.

Notice what Jesus said about anger in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21-22:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.”
²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment....

Is He now telling us that just being angry is as bad as murder? Through Moses, God gave us this commandment: we should not murder one another. The question is, where does murder start? Unless you are mentally deranged, you do not just wake up one day and say, “I think I will kill somebody today.” That is not where it starts—it starts with anger. If anger is not tended to in a healthy way it escalates, it descends into bitterness. Then it starts expressing itself in destructive, vindictive, and vile ways until, for some people, it goes as far as murder. What Jesus is saying is that for My disciples,

murder never even comes on the radar screen. My disciples would not even think of murder because as soon as anger shows up on their radar screens, they deal with it; it does not have a chance to grow into anything else.

He says later in that same paragraph that if you start calling your neighbors names and degrading them, you put yourself in the position of being their judge. If you have an offering you want to bring to the church, but you know that a brother has something against you, leave the offering and take care of brokenness first; it has the greater priority. If you are on your way to court, make peace before you get there so things do not escalate.

One of Satan's favorite devices is convincing you to destroy your own spirit with bitterness. He wants to destroy you, your family, your marriage, your church, even nations; and he does it through the brokenness and the bitterness that comes from unresolved anger.

Paul gives examples of how the new self adopts different habits due to a changed view. This rethinking creates a different environment in your soul and a different way of viewing the world. He starts with "stuff." He says that for people who are used to stealing things or who are absorbed in "stuff," it is all about acquiring. It is all about coveting this or that. They do whatever they can, even steal, to get it. Instead, it is not all about you and about what you acquire, but it is about you being a blessing to others by using your ability and the talents which have been given to you to create something for someone else. Stop doing the old thing; rethink it and replace it with something else.

In Ephesians 4:28-29 he says,

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

This teaches us the correct view of labor. Here is the renewing of your mind. We are all dependent upon each other. In this country, we teach people to be self-sufficient and there is a reason why: it is so that everybody will be responsible for themselves. But a simple fact of the matter is that we are not self-sufficient. We are dependent upon each other!

We have had the delusion that we are self-sufficient because we have wealth, but wealth is essentially worthless if we do not have people who produce the products and services that give that wealth value. Wealth is just the means of exchange. I could have a whole pile of money here—a million dollars' worth—but that is not going to build me a house. It is just a stack of paper. I need people who know how to build houses. I am not going to build roads or build cars to drive. I need a car and roads, but I need other people to do that. Honorable labor not only provides an income for the one who builds and creates, but it provides others with what they need. In this context, Jesus teaches us that we are to love others as He loves us. The meaning of **agape** love is not only about us and about what we want, it is also about Him and His people; providing things for one another is one example.

In a similar spirit, in verse 29 Paul talks about corrupting talk. Think about this for a moment. The gift of speech—the extraordinary ability to communicate with words. The loftiest, greatest thoughts of the human mind have been expressed through language. We have heard it used in the arts, poetry, and music—why would we want others to hear us misuse language? Why would we want One Almighty God to hear us use the incredible gift of language in a way that hurts, in the way that tears down, with filth coming from our mouths? We must rethink why we give ourselves permission to use speech in a way that is destructive rather than to use words to edify others, glorify God, build, and bless.

Friends, if we do not put on a new self, look what Paul says in verse 30: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” If we do not put on the new self,

we grieve the Holy Spirit. Why would we want to do that? Understand that the Holy Spirit is not an “it”! The Holy Spirit is a “He”! He is God! Before He went to heaven, Jesus said, “...behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:10). How does He fulfill this promise? He does it in the person of the Holy Spirit. God is always with us: when He is comforting us, when He is guiding us, when He is correcting us, while He is working out His purpose in the events of human life. We talk in terms of God, the Holy Spirit.

Why would we want to grieve God? The Holy Spirit is the One who brought us to a saving faith to begin with! He is the One who took up our fallen spirit and transformed it from the inside out so we could freely embrace Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. He is the One who will catch us whenever we fall, whenever we are weak. Why would we want to risk grieving Him? Why would we want to drive another nail into the hands of the One who was willing to go to the cross and suffer an unspeakable pain for us?

I remember when I was a child (and I was a far from a perfect child). When I got into trouble, do you know what hurt me more than anything else? It was not so much the punishment I was going to receive; I could deal with that. It was when my mother or my father would look at me and say, “You know, Steven, I’m disappointed in you.” That would kill me. My parents were not perfect parents. My father, for all his good points, was far from a perfect man, but I choose not to remember those things. What I do remember, and what I understood then, was how much they loved me, how much they sacrificed for me, and how much they tried to be there for me as much as they could. They tried to be the best parents they knew how to be. They were not perfect, but they did the best they could. Why would I want to disappoint them? But even more, why would I want to grieve the One who loved me so much He would die for me?

Remember when Paul said in verses 26-27, “...do not sin...give no opportunity to the devil.” Do not give the devil an opportunity because that is what he wants you to do. The devil wants you to be a disappointment. “Steven, he wants you to be a disappointment to

your mom and dad. He wants you to drive another nail in Jesus' hands." But if we want nothing to do with falsehood, if we want nothing to do with prolonging brokenness through anger, if we want nothing to do with Satan and sinning, if we want nothing to do with grieving God, we should seek to live a life serving and edifying others, to live a life of joy in seeing God's hands in all things so there is no room for bitterness. Where is there room for wrath and anger? Where is there room for slandering people? Why choose to hold malice in our hearts for anyone?

I can easily look back on my life and remember people who have hurt me. But I do not want to be angry at those people and spend my life with the burden of remembering them and hating them and still be sad about what they did. They were sinners just like me. They were trying to do the best they could, they did not know any better, or maybe they were too weak...just like me. Verse 31 says, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." Yes, bitterness is a choice we make. And if it is hard to get rid of, do not concentrate only on the bitterness. Concentrate on who you are in Christ. Expel bitterness and any other enemies of the soul. This will result in a new life in Him.

Paul exhorts us to flee from sin. It is sound advice because too often we choose to flirt with it. There are temptations all around us; we may think we can manage them, but we get caught up in their snares. Do you recognize that in the name of Jesus Satan will flee from you? He is the ultimate loser! We know how the Bible ends.

Why in the world are we listening to Satan's lies? Yet we do! He whispers in our ear, "Remember how that person was nasty to you? Remember what they did? Don't you just want to be vindicated? Don't you just want to cut them off at the knees? Don't you just want to be justified in your anger?" We listen to that instead of listening to the Savior. You can say to Satan, "You are not going to rule my life. I am not going to listen to your lies. Go away in the name of Jesus!" And, bam! He is out of the room! But we listen to him instead of listening to the Savior, the source of all truth.

Finally, Paul brings it all together. What is the result of being a disciple of Jesus? “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). It is the natural result of a transformed heart. You do not even have to try very hard; it just flows from your heart like life-giving water. We must check ourselves from time to time to be sure. We must stay under the spiritual disciplines to keep a close relationship with our Master; we must be like Mary and sit at His feet because it is easy to slip into those old habits or create new bad ones. But get this in your minds and in your hearts: Christians are different because we follow a different Master!

Some people like to say, “Well, you know Christians are just like everybody else.” I think their intention is to say that we are sinners like everybody else, and that is true. But ask yourself, “Has your discipleship in Jesus made any impact in your life whatsoever? We are different because we are not conformed to the world and the world’s way of thinking. We are transformed by the Holy Spirit.

Speaking of myself, even now, any time I have anger or have a bad feeling in my heart about somebody or something that I feel is growing, it is almost as if I feel a little tap on my shoulder. Then I turn around and I am looking into the face of my Savior. And with that loving smile on His face, He says, “Steven, don’t you remember that long, long list of things that I could have held against you? How did I treat you? How did I deal with you? And you’re telling Me that you can’t give grace to this one person?” When the Holy Spirit convicts me in that way, it brings me to my knees; at times it brings me to my knees with tears. We love Him and others because He first loved us.

Way back in the Old Testament God said an amazing thing through the voice of Jeremiah, that the day will come when Almighty God will forgive our iniquity and will remember our sin no more. Remember that long list of things to which Jesus made reference in my thoughts? When God looks at that list, it is blank! He chooses not to remember. So, my Lord says to me, “Steven, go and do likewise.”

Christians are different because we are not conformed to the world but transformed by the Holy Spirit. Friends, my prayer for us which brings all this together is that we can say with all sincerity what Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." ■



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