

Five Ways To Change Your World 03
The Terminal Disease Of Bitterness
By Bill Denton

INTRODUCTION

A. We're involved in a month-long series titled, "Five Ways To Change Your World"

1. The first thing we learned is that the only person you can do anything about is yourself – you can only change you!
2. Next we learned the tremendous power of attitude – bad attitudes cause defeat and failure, while good attitudes promote successes and victories – and we learned that we are to have the attitude Jesus had, achieved by learning to think like Jesus thought

B. Today, I want to talk about one of the great barriers to change

1. I want to talk about bitterness – a condition of mind and heart that begins with anger, but ripens into a festering wound of the soul
2. Defined
 - a. intense, unrelenting hostility or resentment
 - b. caused by people, events, circumstances, etc., that are grievous, distressing, hurtful, or damaging, etc.
3. Bitterness creates serious, severe problems for the one who is bitter
 - a. because bitterness is long-held anger and resentment, it can cause mental stress, and result in personality changes
 - b. it can contribute to physical problems like high blood pressure, heart disease, digestive tract disorders, and even arthritis
 - c. it is caused by, and contributes to, spiritual problems: anger, hatred, grudges, spiteful and other ungodly behavior

C. The reason many people need to experience changes in their world is because they are suffering from a bad case of bitterness

1. I would remind you of the first two lessons in this series
 - a. you're the only one you can change
 - b. your attitude needs to be like that of Jesus
2. Immediately, you ought to see that the change needed is not just in the person, event, or circumstance that created your problem
 - a. the change needed must begin with you
 - b. bitterness only makes bad things worse

D. Let's talk about the terminal disease of bitterness

1. I say "terminal" because bitterness will kill you in several different ways
2. It will certainly make "life" unbearable

I. THE PROBLEM OF BITTERNESS

A. We need to begin with a few thoughts about the problem of bitterness

1. **Proverbs 14:10 (NAS)** — It is real, not imaginary
10 The heart knows its own bitterness. . . .
2. **Lamentations 3:19–20 (NAS)** — it causes intense internal pain
19 Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. **20** Surely my soul remembers And is bowed down within me.
3. **Acts 8:22–24 (NAS)** — It is sometimes associated with one's own sin
22 "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. **23** "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." **24** But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."
4. **Romans 3:10–14 (NAS)** — It is associated with unbelieving, rebellious people
10 as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; **11** There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; **12** All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one." **13** "Their throat is an open grave, With their tongues they keep deceiving," "The poison of asps is under their lips"; **14** "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness";
5. **Ephesians 4:31 (NAS)** — We are taught to get rid of it
31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

B. It can happen to the best of us

1. **2 Sam 16:5ff** – a man named Shimei began to curse David and throw rocks at him
 - a. it was already a low point in David's life because he was at war with his son, Absalom
 - b. Abishai, one of David's men, wanted to go over and cut Shimei's head off
 - c. but David seems to have taken the high road, went on his way, and told his men to leave Shimei alone
 - d. it all looks like another star in David's crown, until. . . .
2. **1 Kings 2:8–9 (NAS)** — David's dying words to Solomon
8 "Behold, there is with you Shimei the son of Gera the Benjamite, of Bahurim; now it was he who cursed me with a violent curse on the day I went to Mahanaim. But when he came down to me at the Jordan, I swore to him by the Lord, saying, 'I will not put you to death with the sword.' **9** "Now therefore, do not let him go unpunished, for you are a wise man;

and you will know what you ought to do to him, and you will bring his gray hair down to Sheol with blood.”

C. Bitterness tends to burrow deep into our minds and hearts, and causes us to hold on to the hurts of life in ways that damage nobody but ourselves

1. Some of you here today have experienced pain caused by people, events and circumstances of life
2. Some of you have been victims of other people’s words and actions
 - a. maybe those words disparaged you, or embarrassed you
 - b. maybe they criticized you, blamed you, or judged you
 - c. people may have done things that frightened you, or hurt you
 - d. you might wear the scars caused by those people
3. Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king.
The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (Harper, 1993)

D. People usually believe they are justified in their bitterness

1. In other words, “I have a right to feel this way because of what the other person said or did, or because of what happened, or because my circumstance is very real”
2. Nobody is denying that things happen that hurt us terribly
 - a. but you can acknowledge the reality of life without it making you bitter
 - b. you are in much more control of your response, we just don’t believe it

E. People are often unaware, or unwilling to admit that they are bitter

1. Illustration – couple that came for counseling; each began on wedding night 27 years past and listed scores of faults and mistakes of the other person
2. I suspect that it would shock some of you to discover that you suffer from a greater degree of bitterness than you know, or are willing to admit
3. Here’s what I know to be true – you’re hurting yourself more than anyone else

II. YOU CAN CHANGE YOUR BITTER HEART AND ATTITUDE

A. Here is what God's word has to say about this problem

1. **Colossians 3:8 (NAS)** —

8 But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.

2. **Ephesians 4:30–32 (NAS)** —

30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. **31** Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. **32** Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

B. While it is true that ridding ourselves of bitterness may be difficult, the fact that it is difficult is no excuse for disobeying God

1. God's words says, "Put it away"

2. Even if at the moment, you don't know how to do it, know this – it is possible to put away our anger and bitterness

3. It's not just possible, it's what God expects Christians to do

4. You can't continue to carry around deep-seated anger, resentment and bitterness

C. Let me give you a few "fast start" pointers

1. You may need to face your past and realize you're carrying around a load of anger, resentment and bitterness

- a. you can't put it away if you don't or won't see your problem
- b. look for things that stir you up, causes fresh anger or pain, or causes you to relive the negative emotions of the past

2. You may need to forgive someone

- a. forgiving others is not up for debate or choice
- b. Mt 18:21-35 teaches that if we don't forgive we won't be forgiven

3. Learn new behaviors

a. **Ephesians 4:32 (NAS)** —

32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

- b. there is a reason that "kind" and "tender-hearted" comes before "forgiving each other"

CONCLUSION

A. Bitterness makes for a life that begs and pleads for some change

1. You're the only one who can do anything about your bitterness
2. It's very much rooted in your attitude, and very much in your power to change

B. Bitterness is a dead-end street, leading to a dead life

1. Bitterness will ruin your relationships with people, and even prevent you from having relationships that you can enjoy
2. Bitterness alienates you from others, boxes you into a closed-off little world of your own where nobody else wants to be
3. Bitterness creates a bad-tasting stew of emotions that make you feel worse and worse about everything

C. Bitterness makes it impossible to live a life of faith in God

1. Bitterness results in a lack of faith
2. Bitterness leads to disobedience of God's word

D. Illustration

Martin Luther was depressed over a long period of time. Whether it was a matter of bitterness or some other spiritual problem, the result was the same. One day his wife came downstairs dressed all in black.

"Who died?" Martin Luther asked.

"God has," replied his wife.

"God hasn't died," said Luther.

His wife replied, "Well, live like it and act like it."

E. Invitation