

# LENT 5 SERMON NOTES AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

## SUFFERING AND HOPE



### PART 5. BECOMING BITTER OR BETTER

#### WELCOME

Read all of the following seven quotes first. Then take turns to say which is your favourite and why! (But first please agree as a group to not be political at all! Do you all agree?)

*"Bitterness is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die." - Pastor John Ortberg*

*"There's no such thing as a bitter man who keeps the bitterness to himself." - Erwin W. Lutzer*

*"Stir not the bitterness in the cup that I mixed for myself,' said Denethor. 'Have I not tasted it now many nights upon my tongue, foreboding that worse lay in the dregs?" - J.R.R. Tolkien*

*"It is a simple but forgotten truth that the greatest enemy to present joy and high hopes is the cultivation of retrospective bitterness." - 12th Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies*

*"Something my mum taught me years and years and years ago, is life's just too short to carry around a great bucket-load of anger and resentment and bitterness and hatreds and all that sort of stuff." - 26th Prime Minister Of Australia, Kevin Rudd*

*"I'm a person that carries everything that happened to me in my past, with me into the future. I refuse to let it make me bitter. I still completely believe in love." - Actress Nicole Kidman*

*"I hate thinking about how many people have gone to church for decades and remain joyless or judgmental or bitter or superior." - Pastor John Ortberg*

# WHAT IS BITTERNESS? ANGER WE NURSE WHEN SINNED AGAINST!

The problem with bitterness is how it starts - not with our own sin, but with someone else sinning against us. When someone sins against us it is normal (and even healthy) to feel hurt and angry. But when we nurse that anger, keep it alive, and hold on to the offense, this becomes bitterness. We might have been completely innocent and done nothing wrong. Bitterness often feels right because we haven't done anything wrong. But when we hold on to the offense of another's sin we become a slave to it. Another word for this might be 'unforgiveness'.

Read the following Bible passage and reflect on it quietly for a while.

## ***Ephesians 4:26,31-32***

***In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.***

Discuss what you hearing! What did you notice?

What is the opposite of 'all bitterness rage and anger...' ?

What is the basis of Christian forgiveness?

# WHY IS BITTERNESS HARD TO SEE IN OURSELVES? BECAUSE IT POINTS THE FINGER AT OTHERS!

If you told Anders he was being bitter he wouldn't have seen it. He would have said that he had a right to be angry - and perhaps he did? He was just speaking the truth as he saw it. Anders was busy pointing the finger at all the sinners and fools around him. Bitterness is hard to see in ourselves because bitterness is pointing the finger at others.

Read and reflect on the following Bible passage...

***Hebrews 12:14-15 . Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled...***

Now focus specifically on some words - what do each of these highlight for you?

- the holiness without which no one will see the Lord
- the grace of God
- root
- become defiled

It's traditionally understood that this book of the Bible was written for Jewish Christians who lived in Jerusalem. They were under threat for their faith. They were the first Christians to be persecuted. And the writer advises them to avoid the 'root of bitterness'. He advises them not to nurse their anger against their persecutors. When the writer of Hebrews says bitterness causes us to be defiled it is very strong language.

## **WHO ARE WE MOST LIKELY TO BE BITTER AGAINST? THOSE CLOSEST TO US.**

If you are wondering if there is any bitterness in your life then the first place to examine in your life is closest to home. Bitterness often begins with those closest to us. When we hate someone or refuse to forgive someone we become a slave. Rather than plotting our own path and choosing our own way we are now defined by the hurt we have received. Jim Wilson writes:

*Bitterness remembers details. You have had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you have forgotten. But this one took place five years ago, and you remember every single word... You know exactly what happened - which means you are bitter. Some might object and say that it is also possible to have a good memory of a wonderful conversation. Yes, but not as likely. Why is this? Because memory is helped by review, review, and more review.*

*- Jim Wilson 'How To Be Free From Bitterness' Cannon Press.*

Who have you felt bitterness against in your life?

## **HOW CAN WE BREAK FREE FROM BITTERNESS?**

### **1. GET A MORE HONEST PICTURE OF OURSELVES**

***Matthew 7:1-5. "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.***

Reflect on this Bible passage quietly. Then comment on what you see or hear.

As long as our finger is pointed at others we are unable to repent of our own sin and be free. We need to realise that bitterness is sin too. We need a more honest picture of ourselves. We need to see that our bitterness is wrong. We need to realise that just like our enemy, just like the one who hurt us, we are a sinner too. Perhaps our first prayer might be for God to humble us and show us our own faults?

How does knowing you are a forgiven sinner change your attitude to others?

## 2. RECEIVE A BETTER IMAGE OF GOD

Read the following Bible passages and comment on what they reveal about God.

***Luke 23:33-34. Then they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals-one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."***

***Colossians 1:15, 19-20. Christ is the image of the invisible God... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.***

***1 John 1:8-9. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all righteousness.***

One thing that keeps us bitter is our idea of God. We may see God as wrathful and angry. We may have an idea of God that loves what we do but hates our enemies. This kind of image of God only fuels bitterness. If God is like that then every person on this planet is bound for hell. We need a better image of God. Just as we need a more honest picture of ourselves, we also need a better picture of God. God's very nature and heart are love. God loves his enemies and our enemies! Jesus reveals the very heart of God as grace. And God's grace is so amazing because of how little we deserve it. Until we see how undeserving we are we never realise how amazing God's grace is!

What do you think of the above statement? How do you feel about it?

## 3. FORGIVENESS.

***Mark 11:25. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your sins."***

***Colossians 3:13. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.***

As I prepared to preach about bitterness I prayed for God to show me any bitterness in my life. I asked God to show me who he wanted me to forgive and let go of. I was confronted by a number of names! God's Holy Spirit showed me who I needed to forgive. And so I said out loud, "In the name of Jesus I let go and forgive..." for each one. That's what Jesus asks us to do. When we stand praying we should name them before God and forgive them. When we experience forgiveness we start praying for our enemies in a different way - not for their punishment, but instead that they might receive forgiveness and love too.

Now it's time to finish in prayer. Pray and forgive those who have hurt you.

## TIME OF PRAYER