

The Prayer that Changes Me: Cleanse Me Resisting the Bitterness that Hinders My Life Matthew 6:9-13

There is one passage so simple that more children know it than any other.

There are 5 verses that have been memorized and recited by more millions of people, across the world, and to this very day, than any other portion of God's Word.

The most powerful, simplest, and most life changing 72 words in the Bible is the Prayer for God to Change Me in Matthew 6:9-13.

In the model prayer that we are to pattern our life-long prayer life after, is that constant reminder when we ask God to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

God said remember every day, and each time you pray that the pathway to enjoying the benefits of forgiveness ***is completely tied to whether you have a forgiving and tender heart!***

Did you catch how seriously Jesus warns the danger of an un-forgiving, embittered heart?

Jesus just told us as believers that if we are unforgiving, we would trap ourselves in the prison house and find ourselves in solitary confinement, tortured by the poisonous and sharp cutting edge of bitterness. Just look at someone in the grip of bitterness and you will see the torture they are going through; sadly they can't see it is self-inflicted torture.

More and more we see people seeking vengeance either outside or inside the bounds of the law. Just this week a crowd in Oakland, California rioted, looted, and wreaked havoc to get even for a crime they felt was not justly punished. This pervasive unwillingness to forgive in our society is also the leading cause of the breakups in family relationships¹.

Bitterness Pervaded the World of the Bible

¹ Adapted from MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians 4*, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983.

God has always worked out His plan in this world through individual believers who struggle² through life. One of the struggles believers have always faced while seeking to follow the Lord is how to avoid allowing the hurts of life to turn into simmering bitterness.

The key passage in the New Testament epistles, that warns about the dangers of bitterness is Ephesians 4:29-32, Let's go there.

*Ephesians 4:29-32 Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. 30 And **do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God**, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 **Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.** 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. NKJV*

Did you notice the list of "Spirit-Grievers" in v. 31? The immeasurable power of God, poured out through our lives by the Holy Spirit is stopped, plugged up, staunched, and greatly hindered when His people disobey in these critical areas. God's grace teaches us to deny ungodliness (Titus 2:11-13), but when we resist that grace, our sin grieves and quenches the Holy Spirit³.

So Paul says don't allow your choices to grieve the Spirit of God, don't quench Him, because apart from God's power nothing can be done that will last. Just as the congregations back then were told to deny ungodliness in any form, so must we also today.

But what heads the list of "Spirit-grievers" in Ephesians 4:31? Let "all bitterness" that is every kind, every form, every way it is manifested; get rid of anything to do with bitterness because it threatens the very heart of your daily spiritual life!

Bitterness is a very deadly, fast-growing, and easily spread form: of spiritual cancer. So the bottom line is that:

Lives Energized by the Spirit Are Hindered by Bitterness

Each time the word bitterness is used in the New Testament, it always is a form of the Greek word *pic*. This word means just what the tool by the similar sounding word comes from, "to prick or cut." This Greek word used for bitterness implies something that pricks or punctures and penetrates deeply.

This verse is fascinating for two reasons:

² The reality of our new life in Christ is that it is a struggle. When Paul wrote to Titus, he had already described himself as a fellow-struggler through this world (Romans 15:30; I Timothy 6:12; II Timothy 4:7). Paul calls born-again believers under the guidance of the Spirit of God *sunagonidzomai* or in English "fellow-strugglers".

³ Just as the armies of Israel were defeated because of Achan's hidden sin, and the ministry of the churches of Asia Minor were halted because of the un-forsaken sins of each congregation—so the early church was forced to see that when God's Spirit is grieved and quenched, the power of the saints to live the impossible life wanes.

- First, bitterness is the very first sin that is listed after Paul warns about the horrible dangers of grieving the Holy Spirit of God as a believer. Bitterness is FIRST in that list; never forget that.
- Second, the verse on the other side of the warning (v. 29) is all about corrupt words (one of the danger signs of a bitter person is that they say rotten things about others).

At the heart of bitterness is some form of a hurt that is internalized and not forgiven.

Christ's Frightening Warning to Believers

Perhaps the strongest warning Jesus ever gave to his disciples was in Matthew 18—he warned that the results of a bitter and unforgiving heart were grave.

For a moment turn there to Matthew 18:21-35, and stand with me and listen to the gravity of Christ's warning about the dangers of holding onto hurts, closing our hearts to tenderly forgiving others, and allowing an unforgiving spirit to prick and pierce the Spirit of God's work in our lives.

*Matthew 18:21-35 Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 "Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 "And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 "But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. 26 "The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' 27 "Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. 28 "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' 29 "So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' 30 "And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. 31 "So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. 32 "Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. 33 'Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' 34 "And his master was angry, and delivered him **to the torturers** until he should pay all that was due to him. 35 **"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."** NKJV*

Pray

Quickly review what Jesus said as we scan these 15 verses.

The last phrase is astounding. Jesus told His very own chosen disciples (and us who follow them) that God wants us to be kind and tender-hearted and forgiving.

Bitterness primarily harms me, not the person that hurt me. Holding onto an unforgiving spirit always leads to bitterness. That is why Jesus Christ offers this self-diagnostic, spiritual truth to each of us:

Bitterness Leads to Intense Inner Torment

Look again at what Jesus said in v. 34: He said that we hand ourselves over to the torturers (v. 34) when we embitter our hearts against someone. Those who live in the gall of bitterness, listen closely: ***imprison themselves in an emotional concentration camp and become the victims of immense internal torment.***

Nurturing bitterness instead of love (that leads to tenderness and a forgiving spirit) is as foolish as drinking poison or diving into a dark pit. Our refusals to forgive wall us into solitary confinement, and bitterness becomes our tormentor. Jesus warns that any believer is a candidate for this unspeakable emotional and mental torment when they begin making an unforgiving response to hurts.

Do you see now why Paul lists bitterness first in the lineup of Spirit-grievers in Ephesians 4? Do you see why he says "put away ALL bitterness"? He says it is so deadly, so painful, so quick to spread that it must be dealt with right away.

A bitter person is cut and punctured by the words or actions of others. Those wounds untreated by the healing grace of a tenderhearted, forgiving attitude become a source of malignant poison. So this wound infects the wounded person with bitterness, a hurtful condition that touches every part of their life.

As Hebrews 12 warns us from the life of Esau, bitterness spreads throughout a person's life until everything around them and in them gets defiled by bitterness.

Hebrews 12:15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; NKJV

Now go back with me in your mind to the nurturing love we have been considering these past two weeks for godly women of grace.

One of the telltale signs of a wife or mother being hindered in living out her God given calling is when she feels "hurt" by her husband or children. Those hurts can quickly get infected and become resentful feelings, which always grow into bitterness. So a godly woman (and for that matter, every believer) is called by God's Word to:

Say NO to

Bitterness Daily

Why should we be so careful about bitterness? Because of these 4 dangers:

1. ***Bitterness imprisons a believer's emotions.*** Failing to forgive another will imprison a believer in their past. Bitterness nurtures pain and keeps it alive, never allowing the wound to heal. The longer the hurt is dwelt upon, the more our anger is fed, resentment grows, and joy is extinguished. Forgiveness energized by grace opens our prison doors and sets us free from our past.
2. ***Bitterness poisons a believer's life.*** Bitterness is not just a sin; it is an infection that poisons our speech making it biting, cutting, sarcastic, and slanderous. Bitterness poisons our emotions making them violent, unpredictable, intolerant, vengeful, and ungodly. Bitterness poisons all relationships making them void of affection, devoid of love, and emptied of kindness. The writer of Hebrews warns, "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled" (Heb. 12:15). Forgiveness energized by grace replaces bitterness with love, joy, peace, and the other fruits of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22-23).
3. ***Bitterness opens believer's lives to Satan.*** When Paul warned believers about improper anger he mentioned Satan's horrible presence in Ephesians 4:26-27, "Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity." When Paul similarly charged the Corinthians he again joins Satan's destructive influence upon believers who leave open this strategic door as he wrote, "Whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes" (2 Cor. 2:10-11). The Bible clearly warns that unforgiving-based bitterness offers the most ground that Satan gains in our lives. Forgiveness energized by grace bars that avenue of demonic attack.
4. ***Bitterness closes a believer's life to God.*** Remember how soberly Christ spoke in the Sermon on the Mount? "If you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt. 6:14-15). Jesus was not saying that believers lose the completed, past forgiveness of salvation. He was warning that bitterness robs them of their ongoing relational forgiveness with God the Father. We cannot be right with God when unforgiving of others. Forgiveness energized by grace always restores us to the place of maximum blessing, returning us to purity and the joy of fellowship with God.

God wants believers to avoid bitterness so much that He constantly emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in Scripture. God is a forgiving God, Christ's work is an offer

of forgiveness, and in God's Word there are no less than 75 different word pictures about forgiveness in the Bible⁴. So we each need to become skilled in:

Spotting Signs of Bitterness

What are the warning signs of bitterness? As I list off some of the most common signs of bitterness, ask yourself as a wife or mother (and all the rest of us who are listening) if you are showing any of these signs of bitterness.

It is really not that complicated to recognize that bitterness has set in. Let's think of some of the characteristics of a bitter person:

- ***Bitter people often*** show a lack of concern for others. A bitter person cares very little about anybody else.
- ***Bitter people often*** are very sensitive and touchy. For instance, if a bitter person walks into a room where two other people are talking, and those people get quieter as he walks in, the bitter person thinks, "They're talking about me."
- ***Bitter people often*** tend to avoid meeting new people, show little or no gratitude at all, and usually speak words of empty flattery or harsh criticism.
- ***Bitter people often*** hold grudges against others, often for a long, long time. They find it extremely difficult to forgive.
- ***Bitter people often*** have a stubborn or sulking attitude.
- ***Bitter people often*** end up experiencing mood extremes - very high and happy one minute, and the next thing you know, they're so low they can reach up and touch bottom.

Bitterness can be called the seed of Hell because one of the worst things about bitterness is that it doesn't stop. It keeps getting worse. It may only start as a little seed of hurt, but then it grows and festers into a very dangerous thing⁵.

Bitterness is one of the more deadly cancers of the spiritual life of the believer. If you are infected by bitterness, get out of your self-imposed prison now, don't stay in a moment longer. Paul said that the Spirit of God, in the power of Christ's cross can set you free.

The escape route has been marked for us by the One who should have had all the reasons in the world to be bitter but was not.

⁴ These points adapted, paraphrased, and drawn from MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians 4*, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983.

⁵ This list was drawn from an article called **HURT AND BITTERNESS** by Winkie Pratney.

Getting Out of The Bitterness Trap

Remember the two lines of the Lord's Prayer I referenced earlier? Have you ever noticed that this is an appeal from Jesus Himself, for us to bring our need for a forgiving, tenderhearted, un-embittered heart to Him in all our daily communion with God?

Often we have said it so many times we skip right over it. "Forgive us God the way we have forgiven others."

God wants us to forgive others and not cultivate bitterness. Forgiving others isn't denying that they hurt us, or ignoring it either. Getting out of the bitterness trap starts by honestly confronting hurts in our life—and energized-by-grace doing something about each one!

Here are some basic steps.

1. **Make a list of the people who've hurt you.** This is always easiest for us because that is what we remember the best—the offenses others commit against us. Just jot names and things they have done to hurt you. Here are some typical hurts: "My parents didn't keep their promises." "They gave more love and affection to other members of the family." "My dad took out his bad temper on me." "My wife tries to make me into something I'm not." "My friend wasn't there when I needed him," etc.
2. **Make another list of the things you have done to hurt them.** Whoa, this is the hard part. Pride effectively edits our memories of the wrongs we do by shifting the blame, hiding our guilt, and so on. Our flesh likes our faults to stay hidden from others, so pray and ask God to shine the light of the Spirit upon your heart and expose ways you have harmed others.

One of the hardest things to do is to really clear the debts between parents and children. You could put down things like: laziness, ungratefulness (when was the last time you ever thanked your parents - just called them and thanked them?), deceitfulness (what have you done behind their backs to make them distrust you?), etc.

Making a list of those I have wronged is vital. Only when we agree with God about our sin and see it as He sees it—can we be forgiven (I John 1:9). One of the results of making such a list is that we find that in most of the ways that we have been hurt, we hurt others. My pride maximizes others' faults and minimizes mine. This exercise will bring reality into focus.

3. **Take a good look at how you have hurt the Lord.** Now we are at the most important place in our grace-energized journey out of bitterness. This is the most life-changing step.

Get down on your face before God and ask Him to reveal all the ways you have hurt Him. God's Word says He is grieved when we sin. Do we miss that terrible truth? Spurgeon said, **"For it is an inexpressibly delightful thought, that He who rules heaven and earth, and is the creator of all things, and the infinite and ever blessed God, condescends to enter into such infinite relationships with his people that his divine mind may be affected by their actions."**

Each area the Spirit convicts you about, revealing where you have grieved God, confess and forsake, making no excuses to God. God said Christ's blood cleanses away our sins not our excuses. We are transformed as we see that though God has been deeply hurt (grieved), He loves and forgives us and NEVER gets embittered towards us. People closest to us can hurt us the most—right? Now as a believer, think about who knows every thought, hears every word, feels every emotion we have ever had. God does, right? We have the potential to hurt God so much, and we do. Yet He forgives.

Because He forgives, He demands that we must do so also to all who hurt us. The Bible says that "The Lord was grieved that He had made man on the earth, and His heart was filled with pain." (Genesis 6:6) The phrase "heart filled with pain" literally means "to have difficulty in breathing." God made this beautiful creation and then He sees people not only hating and killing each other, but hating Him, too. And all that hurt goes deep, deep into His heart. We forget that God has a perfect memory. We only see a little bit - He sees it all, continuously. We only live a short time - He lives forever. When God looked at the world He made, He gasped with pain and horror. It hurt Him.

4. **Pray, and ask the forgiveness of God and man.** Now comes the simplest and hardest part of our task. Get alone with your list of how you hurt God and others and ask God to work in your heart. One by one confess them to God, then ask for and receive His forgiveness for everything you have listed (and more as He reminds you). Then you need to tear up that list and get rid of it. Just doing that is a picture of how God wipes out, erases, washes clean, and removes our sins. Then you need to get in touch with those you have hurt and, either by letter, email, phone, or in person, ask for their forgiveness.
5. **Destroy your files.** Finally, there is one more vital step to take. There is still a copy of that list, it is in your mind. God says that He can also wipe that file clean. Hebrews 9:14 and 10:22 say that the blood of Christ, through the Eternal Spirit will purge your conscience from things that defile and will allow you to get close to the Lord with a pure heart, confident you are right with Him, and as much as is possible with others.

Open the filing cabinets of your mind, take out all the files, and get rid of them. Tear up your list and burn it. You must release it all to God. Forgiveness is opening the filing cabinet before God and clearing the debts. "I'm not going to hold this against them. I'm not even going to keep a record of it." No record. That's what

God does with you. Do you want Him to remember and recall all the debts He has cleared you of? You do the same.

The Bible says, "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." (Matt. 6.14-15)

It's a choice you must make in response to God's offer of forgiveness to you. What will you do?⁶

Communion with God moment-by-moment is to be our declaration that we have chosen to be forgiving of others, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us. The best thing we could ever do is come to the cross, seek His mercy and grace. Cling to the cross where He died in our place.

Lives energized-by-grace deny this form of ungodliness and walk in the Spirit with a forgiving and tender heart.

Why not stand with me, and make those words of the Lord's Prayer your constant plea; and stay off the pathway to the prison house bitterness

⁶ This list was quoted and paraphrased from an article called **HURT AND BITTERNESS** by Winkie Pratney.

APPENDIX: Series Overview

God has a Seven Desires For Every Young Woman

These seven qualities are to become the life-priorities for grace-energized young women.

1. **Love Their Husbands:** Self-sacrificing love in a selfish world
2. **Love Their Children:** Nurturing love in a loveless world
3. **Discreet:** Focusing on God in a foolish world
4. **Chaste:** Pursuing modesty in an immodest world
5. **Homemakers:** Pursuing homemaking in a hostile world
6. **Good:** Pursuing kindness in a harsh world
7. **Obedient to their Husbands:** Pursuing submission in a rebellious world

Young Women of Godliness

Paul then asks Titus to address the younger ladies in the congregations. The younger women were to be pointed down a pathway that would lead to them becoming the godly, older women of great influence in Christ's church. To be that woman of influence, these were the seven characteristics God was looking for on your spiritual resume, Paul asks Titus to explain.

v. 4b the young women:

1. "to love their husbands" as the Greek word **philandrous** is translated in the NKJV; and : The most powerful tool in God's hands for a watching world is a band of godly wives who live out in their marriages, Christ's **Self-sacrificing Love in a Selfish World;**
2. "to love their children" as the Greek word **philekous** is translated in the NKJV; Then these women continue as mothers who demonstrate Christ's **Nurturing Love in a Loveless World;**
3. v. 5 "to be discreet" as the Greek word **sophronous** is translated in the NKJV; Greek⁷ word here is the same in all four groups of the church younger women who are in tune with the Lord also are **Focusing on God in a Foolish World;**
4. "chaste" as the Greek word **philandrous** is translated in the NKJV;: They seek to be **Pursuing Modesty in an Immodest World;**
5. "homemakers" as the Greek word **oikergous** is translated in the NKJV; : And, knowing the role God has given to them, they seek His well done good and faithful servants by **Pursuing Homemaking in a Hostile World;**
6. "good" as the Greek word **agathous** is translated in the NKJV; And all through life they are **Pursuing Kindness in a Harsh World**

⁷ Older men #4998; older women # 4993; here for younger women # 4994; and younger men # 4998.

7. "obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed" as the Greek word *hupokuo* is translated in the NKJV; And finally, in step with the Spirit, and energized by grace they are **Pursuing Submission in a Rebellious World.**