

December 11, 2012

Matthew 6:9-15 / Colossians 3:12-14 / Ephesians 4:29-32  
 Holiness Defined (#3): Bitterness Rejecting, Rage Resisting, Kind,  
 Compassionate and Forgiving

Last week I ended my message by looking at Paul's command in v. 30 where he told us, "**Do not quench the Holy Spirit of God...**" And today Paul continues with that same theme, by giving us five more things that, "quench the Holy Spirit," both in us and the Church / before giving us three aspects of holiness which actually create an atmosphere where the Holy Spirit is freed to move in unhindered (or unquenched) fullness both in us / and in the Church as a collective body.

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So let's consider the five sinful attitudes and actions which we must Rid ourselves of, beginning **FIRST** with the Spirit-quenching effect that bitterness has upon both us, and the Church. "**Rid yourself,**" says Paul, "**of ALL bitterness.**" WHY? Because you can't be full of bitterness, and at the same time, be full of the Holy Spirit. For the one works against the other.

The presence of "bitterness" in a believers heart quenches the power and presence of the Spirit in their life. Because as the Spirit is trying to produce love, joy, peace, patience and all the other godly fruit / bitterness acts to erode them at the root, by producing the exact opposite.

It would be somewhat like planting vegetable seeds in your garden / and then watering them with gallons of salty brine. Seeds can't grow in salt! You must either get rid of the salt or forget trying to plant the seeds and grow vegetables!

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And Listen: Paul isn't saying we need to be full of bitterness to have it negatively affect our spirit. He simply implies it has to be present (to even the smallest degree) in our soul.

That's why he can say: "**Rid yourself of ALL bitterness...**" Because even the littlest pollutes the soul. It's like one little drop of red food coloring dripped into a glass of water, it discolors the entire glass. Bitterness has that type of effect on the soul.

So, what exactly is bitterness and why does it have such a negative effect upon the soul? The Greek word translated "bitterness" is "*pikria*," and it means, "*sharp, pointed like an arrow, piercing or penetrating.*" If used in reference to the taste buds it means, "*pungent, acrid, sour, or brackish,*" and in ancient times, excessively bitter things they were considered "*a form of poison.*" And most importantly, when referring to one's inner feelings or disposition, it means, "*resentful, malignant, cruel or harsh.*"

The bitter person, then, is a person who usually has an axe to grind, a score to settle, or pent up and unresolved resentment. They have someone they'd love to get back at, or get even with, and are usually nursing a wound that has festered into a grudge, making them wish ill-will upon the perpetrator.

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So in a way, the ancients were right when they considered "bitter things" to be poison -- because when applied to the soul, it is so true. The bitter person / or as we could put it, the person who refuses to forgive a wrong done to them / or let go of a grudge / or worse yet, the person who nurses a grudge / does indeed poison their own soul.

They keep their soul locked in a bitter vat of salty brine / which sours their attitude / and thwarts the growth of godly fruit.

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And I know most don't think of it that way, because holding on to bitterness (as all counselors know) does tend to give people a feeling of power over those who have hurt them. Yet they pay heavy price to cling to that feeling of power.

For it does sour their disposition, short circuit their ability to love and feel joy, and lies just under the surface of their being, ever ready to erupt in displays of anger at even the slightest provocation.

It robs the soul of peace and inner rest / feeds resentful thoughts / and fuels unhealthy feelings that can even lead to physical ailments. / It can even (on occasion) distort one's facial expression.

On one occasion (when I pastored a church in Everett, MA), I was called by a local funeral home director to do a funeral for an unchurched lady

who had just passed away. But before I even had a chance to respond, he added: *"I have to be honest with you though. There probably won't be many people there. She was a very bitter woman, and even her family has expressed doubts as to whether any of them will come to the service."*

Only one or two did. In fact, only 6-7 people showed up. But that wasn't the saddest part. The saddest part was that she had an open coffin, and her bitterness had so consumed her life, that the mortician (though he did try) could not remove the scowl from her face. Even in death her bitterness followed her to the grave.

It brings to mind the wise words I once saw on a poster: ***"Holding on to bitterness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die."*** It's true. The person which bitterness hurts the most is the one who refuses to let it go. It rarely ever bothers or hurts the perpetrator at all.

My friends, if you're here today, and you have unresolved bitterness in your soul -- and you'll know you do if a person or event just popped into your head as I said that -- then you need to follow Paul's admonition and, ***"Rid yourself of ALL of it."*** For even the slightest bit can ruin the production of godly fruit, and thus, ***"quench the Holy Spirit of God"*** in you, and this body.

Then **SECOND**, Paul tells us to: ***"Get rid of all... RAGE and ANGER"*** (rage, of course, being a heightened or more emotionally dangerous form of anger). In fact, when anger festers and turns into rage it usually (at some point) gives birth to either verbal abuse, physical abuse, or some type of violence.

Now interestingly, the word for "anger" comes from a Hebrew word that literally means, "the nose." Or in its verbal form, "to snort from the nose." And the best picture to think of here would be an infuriated bull, who stares with angry eyes at its tormentor, dips his head, scuffs his hoof, snorts through his nostrils, and then charges full speed at the object of his anger.

Likewise, the word translated "rage" carries with it the sense of "heat" -- burning anger, or smoldering emotions or red hot rage." In fact, we could say that "rage" is anger that is fed. Rage is like water allowed to boil in a pressure cooker over a hot fire, until it turns to steam, which needs to be released lest it explode!

Rage, then, is anger fueled by underlying bitterness and unforgiveness. In fact, many times, it is purposefully fueled, since rage carries with it an immense degree of emotionally pent up power -- thus making the one in whom it builds up, feel strong and invincible.

Two individuals -- both of equal strength and physical ability -- will find that one is no match for the other, when one is calm and peaceful, and the other is filled with rage. That's why sports teams going into a big athletic showdown, love to get someone on the other team to say something they can use to feed their anger or fuel their rage! Because anger increases strength, and can thereby give one team the advantage over the other.

Most athletes know that, and some use it to their advantage -- though it's not just in sports. For as Martin Luther, the great reformer, is quoted as saying: "***I preach best when I'm angry.***"

And here I need to say what many of you are probably thinking: If anger (in and of itself) is a morally neutral passion or emotion, then why does Paul say that we must "***Rid ourselves of ALL of it***"?

Didn't he say in v. 26: "***In your anger do not sin,***" or as it can be translated, "***Be angry, but do not sin.***" It was Paul's way of pointing out that anger itself is neither good nor bad and what enables us to label it as either righteous or unrighteous, just or sinful, is what fuels it or how one expresses it.

And that is true. Some anger is good, as when Jesus displayed "righteous anger" at the moneychangers in the Temple who exploited people's religious devotion for a profit. And the same is true of God's wrath against sin, evil, injustice, exploitation or oppression of the poor. Such things should make us angry. Angry enough to do something appropriate to stop them.

Which means the KEY to understanding why Paul tells us in this verse that we must: "***Rid ourselves of ALL anger and rage***" -- since it's not all evil -- comes to us in the very last phrase of this sentence, where he lists all these things and then says, "***along with EVERY form of malice.***"

And by using that qualifying phrase, he makes it clear, that what we need to do is rid ourselves of any of those things IF they are fueled by, or done with malice in our heart. That is, with, evil intent, wicked desires, maliciousness of purpose or with ill-will as the source of its motivation. We are to rid ourselves of all anger or rage that in any way stems from selfishness, pride or the desire for revenge.

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Then **THIRD** we quench the Holy Spirit through, "***brawling and slander.***" And here I do need to say that the NIV (in my opinion) could have used a better English word to translate the Greek word here listed as, "brawling." Because most people I know tend to think of "brawling" as what? Fighting. Usually a loud, rambunctious, unorganized bar room brawl (as we often see in movies). Right? Isn't that what we tend to think when we hear the word, "brawl."

But what does the word really mean? It comes from a word that means, "***to boast,***" or "***to boast loudly.***" A brawl, therefore, is "***a noisy, clamorous, contentious, quarrel, or a loud, and angry, uproar.***" And a "brawler" is NOT one who fights with his fists, but one who fights with loud words. A "brawler" is one who likes to yell, takes verbal jabs at people, and gets into loud or emotionally-heated arguments.

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So, the NIV translation isn't really wrong, it just uses a word that many people associate with something completely different. Which means that Paul's admonition here, is NOT that we must "***Rid ourselves of all fist fighting***" (though that's probably a good idea too)! / But rather, "***all yelling, screaming, shouting.***"

Because that's what the Greek word "krauge" means: "***yelling, screaming or shouting.***" And again, just as with anger, "krauge" can refer to good yelling, happy screaming, or joyful shouting. In fact, Scripture commands us on occasion to "shout to the Lord," or "declare His praises in the gates" (and it means in loud voice), or proclaim the good news from the rooftops (and it means by shouting joyfully and loudly). It's the same word.

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So what is Paul saying? Listen: He's NOT saying we can't yell, scream or shout! Believers are encouraged to do that as I've just shown. In fact, we could use a little more of it here on occasion!

No. The prohibition is NOT against yelling per se, but against: "Boastful yelling, contentious screaming, angry shouting, loud complaining, angry put downs, or all loud forms of verbal mud-slinging."

We are to rid ourselves of all loud yelling that is ego-based, full of pride, contentious, pejorative, cutting, or puts others down. And most likely he means in the Church. There is no place for relating to one another that way in the Church.

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So Paul's point is this: There is no place for yelling, screaming or shouting at each other in the Church! You want to shout to the Lord? Go for it! You want to proclaim the Good News from the rooftops with an irrepressible smile on your face?! Go for it!

But when you discuss things with other brothers and sisters in the church -- where unity is key -- you must, ***"Rid yourself of all yelling, screaming and shouting."*** Yelling and screaming at people is contrary to holiness. It has no place in the church of God, for it stirs up dissension, and therefore, ***"quenches the Holy Spirit of God."***

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The same is true of ***"slander"*** -- which is any speech that seeks to abuse, defame, or ruin a person's reputation. It has no place in the Church of God where we are called to use every word to build people up, minister to their needs, and impart grace to them, rather than put them down, ruin their reputation or abuse them.

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Which (thankfully) brings us to our **LAST** point -- the godly fruit we are to replace those things with -- kindness, compassion and forgiveness. Three fruits of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In fact, they are three of the main things the Spirit of God works to nurture in us, if we will only let Him, work with Him and stop resisting what He's trying to produce in our soul.

And listen (this is paramount): The phrase ***"Rid yourself,"*** is actually in the passive tense in the Greek. Which means, it should be translated, ***"Let yourself be ridded of..."*** / Or, ***"Let these things be removed from you..."***

**And that is important! Because it means this is NOT something WE must do, but something WE must let GOD do! The Holy Spirit (if He lives in you) is working in you to get you to release bitterness. He's moving in you and prompting you (even now) to do so! And all you have to do is stop fighting Him / and surrender to what He's moving you to do -- forgive!**

That's one of the reasons it "**quenches the Holy Spirit**" when you allow those things to continue to reside in your soul. Because the Holy Spirit is moving you to forgive -- which would bring healing and liberate you from all that stuff -- and you're fighting Him in the process by refusing to do so!

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The work of the Holy Spirit is: To take hard hearts or hearts of stone and make them tender and kind. In fact the word can be translated "tender-hearted" as in the ESV.

It's to take callous, selfish, insensitive hearts that tend to be wrapped up in themselves and indifferent to the pain and suffering of others, and make them sensitive, caring and compassionate.

It's to take hearts wrapped in cold hard chains and sealed with the pad-lock of unforgiveness / and work to get them to, "**forgive each other, just as in Christ, God forgave us.**"

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And here, I need to point out (because the previous 3 chapters of Ephesians make it so undeniably clear) that God forgave us freely, as an act of His grace, and not because we deserved it. And because He forgave us that way, we must forgive others that way as well.

In fact, Paul emphasizes that in the Greek text, because the word translated "**forgive,**" can actually be translated, "**be gracious.**" Hoehner actually translates it that way: "**Be gracious to one another just as in Christ God was gracious to us.**"

And that is soooo important! Because a failure to recognize that, thwarts all true forgiveness. And true forgiveness is the key to ridding ourselves of all those sinful emotions and attitudes and words that quench the Holy Spirit!

At the root of all bitterness, and underlying anger, and explosive rage, and loud slanderous words, lies unforgiveness. If you search to find the root of any or all those things, you will usually discover that it stems from that person's inability to forgive God (heretical as that sounds), to forgive others, or forgive one's self.

Count on it: A bitter person / an angry person / a person who wrestles with explosive rage / as well as a yelling, shouting, or screaming person / or a slanderous person / is almost always a person who is harboring unforgiveness in their soul.

And though they don't want to believe it, they will always remain captive to those things (to one degree or another) until they learn to forgive. Because only forgiveness will purge those things from the soul. Forgiveness -- **GRACIOUS FORGIVENESS** -- is the key to it all.

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WHY? Because Paul tells us that true forgiveness is forgiving, "***just as God, in Christ, forgave us.***" And that phrase "just as" means, "***in the same way that***" or "***in the same manner that God forgave us.***" It's part of our "***imitating God,***" which Paul refers to in chapter 5, v. 1.

***And because we are called to forgive in the same manner God forgives us, that means that we are NOT ALLOWED to withhold forgiveness until those who have offended us become worthy or deserving of our forgiveness. Because forgiveness withheld until a person deserves it is not forgiveness! It's restitution or recompense.***

In fact, forgiveness offered with strings attached, where we secretly cling to the right to take it back the moment we sense the perpetrator is no longer sorry enough, repentant enough is not forgiveness.

As one man insightfully put it: "***Forgiveness is me, giving up the right to hurt you, for hurting me.***" It's not simply forgetting. It's calling the offense to mind (hard as that might be) and yet choosing to release the offender from the penalty of their sin, by paying that penalty ourselves.

Isn't that what Jesus did with us? Didn't He graciously go to the cross and take our place and pay the penalty for our sins Himself? Isn't that what purchased and secured our forgiveness? Yes indeed. We are forgiven because He took it upon Himself to pay the penalty for all our inexcusable sins and offenses and dishonoring transgressions against God.

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And Paul says we are called to do the same. At some point we must determine that we ourselves (the offended party) will bear the consequences that the offender committed against us. And THAT is never easy! Because it means we not only have to endure the pain of the offense, we also have to endure the pain of bearing the punishment they deserve for doing it!

Yet as Neil Anderson writes in his book "The Bondage Breaker":

***"Most of the ground that Satan gains in the lives of Christians is due to unforgiveness... Forgiveness is not forgetting. People who try to forget find they cannot. Even when God says He will, "remember our sins no more," it doesn't mean He will forget them. Being omniscient, He cannot forget." What it means is that He chooses never to use our past against us... / Forgiveness is a choice, a crisis of the will... And it's difficult, because it pulls against our sense of justice. We want revenge for offenses suffered. Yet we are told never to take revenge [but leave it to God - Rom. 12:19]. "Why should I let them off the hook?" we protest. You let them off your hook, but they are never off God's hook. He will deal with them fairly [and justly] -- something we cannot do. If you don't let offenders off your hook, you are hooked to them, and to the past, and that just means continued pain for you... You don't forgive someone merely for their sake; you do it for your sake -- so you can be free. Your need to forgive isn't an issue between you and the offender, it's between you and God. And forgiveness is agreeing to live with the consequences of another person's sin. That's why it's costly -- we pay the price for the evil we forgive [like Christ did]... You're going to live with the consequences whether you want to or not; your only choice [therefore] is whether you will do so in the bitterness of unforgiveness, or the freedom of forgiveness."***

He's right. Withholding forgiveness DOES give us a sense of power over the perpetrator. But in the process it poisons our soul, makes us bitter, makes us a prisoner of *their* crime, makes us a prisoner to the memory of them and what they did, and both creates (and causes us to remain in) a bondage to an underlying ill-willed anger and potentially explosive rage.

Forgiveness, on the other hand -- though very costly and harder than al-most anything else you'll ever do -- brings with it the fresh breezes of an unquenched Spirit.

It brings with it freedom from being controlled by the painful event, freedom from emotional ties to the offender, freedom from continual inner conflict and self-pity.

It brings the freedom to love, find peace, be at rest and face the future / without the heavy burden of that huge ball and chain of unforgiveness fastened to your ankle.

It's the key to nearly all spiritual growth / and the key to freeing up a quenched Holy Spirit.

So do it my friends. Better yet, let it be done by God! Only you know if or whom you need to forgive: A husband / a wife / brother / sister / aunt / uncle / family friend / employer / teacher / former boy or girlfriend / fellow believer / or complete stranger.

***But if you do need to forgive, do it now.***

Because the only one you hurt by clinging to unforgiveness is yourself -- and possibly us -- by "***quenching the Holy Spirit of God,***" both in you and among us as a body.