



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 9th, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

A number of years ago a friend once confided in me that he gets angry very easily and sometimes has a lot of anger inside even when others don't know it from the way he looks. He was speaking for many. For some people anger is corked under a calm exterior. It ferments where no one can see it. Others spout off instantly if they get angry. Others turn red in the face and tremble. Others become sullen and silent. Others become caustic and cutting with their tongue.

But everybody has to deal with it one way or the other—anger is a universal experience, and most of it is not good. I base that on James 1:19–20 which says, "Be slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God." We should learn how to be slow to anger because what comes quickly is usually tainted by unrighteousness. It's simply human rather than being godly.

But we know that not all anger is bad. Jesus was a man without sin, yet it says in Mark 3:5, "He looked around at them with anger grieved at their hardness of heart." And Psalm 7:11 says, "God is angry every day." And Paul says in Ephesians 4:26, "Be angry and sin not." Not all anger is bad. Some is good and right and necessary.

But mainly the Bible warns us against the dangers of anger. "Be slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God" (James 1:19–20). "Put away all anger and wrath and malice" (Colossians 3:8). "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor . . . be put away from you with all malice" (Ephesians 4:31). And today's epistle, "Now the works of the flesh are plain: . . . strife, jealousy, anger . . ." (Galatians 5:20). "Every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:22).

You can see from that last warning that anger is very dangerous. If it takes root in your heart and becomes a grudge or an unforgiving spirit, it can destroy you. We talked about that a few weeks ago. Remember, Jesus said very plainly in Matthew 6:15, "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

When Jesus teaches that an unforgiving spirit or bitterness leads to judgment and not to salvation, he means that bitterness is a kind of unbelief. And the way to fight against it is to fight the fight of faith. The battle against bitterness in our hearts is a battle to believe the Word of God, and bank on the promises of his grace. It's a battle against unbelief! And the peace and rest and joy that come in place of anger and bitterness are the peace and joy that explicitly come by believing in the God of hope (Romans 15:13).

What I want to do then is lay out four ways to battle bitterness by battling unbelief. If God empowers his Word now, there will be great results: your heart will be freed from the burden of bitterness; at least from your side relationships can be healed; one more obstacle can be removed from an authentic witness to Christ, and God will be greatly honored by your trust.

The first way to battle the unbelief of bitterness is very basic: namely, consider what the Doctor says good advice. If the Great Physician says, "Put away anger," don't ignore or reject the counsel. Take pains to put it in your mind and resolve to keep it. That's what you do if you trust your Doctor.

The second way to battle the unbelief of bitterness is to really cherish being forgiven by God. Underline the word cherish. How does being forgiven make you a forgiving person? By believing that we are

forgiven. But saving faith is not merely believing that you are forgiven. Saving faith means believing that God's forgiveness is an awesome thing! Saving faith looks at the horror of sin and then looks at the holiness of God and believes that God's forgiveness is a staggering beauty and unspeakably glorious. Faith in God's forgiveness does not merely mean confidence that I am off the hook. It means confidence that this is the most precious thing in the world. That's why I used the word cherish. Saving faith cherishes being forgiven by God.

And there's the link with the battle against bitterness. You can go on holding a grudge if your faith simply means you are off the hook. But if faith means standing in awe of being forgiven by God, then you can't go on holding a grudge. You have fallen in love with mercy. It's your life. So you battle bitterness by fighting for the faith that stands in awe of God's forgiveness of your sins.

The third way to battle the unbelief of bitterness is to trust that God's justice will prevail. One cause of bitterness is the feeling that you have been wronged by someone. And you get this feeling not only that you should not have been hurt, but that they should be punished. And you may be right. And in feeling right you dwell on the injustice of it. You go over it again and again in your mind, and it chews at your insides. You think of things you might say to put them in their place. You think of things you could do to show others their true colors.

Now God is not pleased by this bitterness. And the reason he's not is because it comes from unbelief in the certainty that God's justice will prevail. Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"

What this text says is that God has made a promise that he himself will repay all wrongs in perfect measure. His justice will prevail. No wrong has escaped his notice. He sees its evil far better than you do. He hates it far more than you do. And he claims the right to take vengeance.

Do you believe this promise? Do you trust God to settle accounts for you far more justly than you could ever settle them? If you do, this text says, you will stop savoring revenge. You will leave it to God, and you will be free to return good for evil and bless those who persecute you (Romans 12:14, 20).

No one was wronged worse than Jesus. No one got a raw deal as bad as his. No one was abused more. No one was rejected more. And no one was as innocent.

So what did he do when his heart filled with moral indignation? St. Peter tells us, when he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23).

That is, he handed over his grievance to God. Why? Because he had become one of us, and he was showing us that vengeance is God's and that justice will prevail. With that confidence Jesus never allowed any sinful bitterness to rise in his heart. And we shouldn't either. The way to battle bitterness is to believe that vengeance belongs to the Lord and he will repay. You all remember the slogan, "If it doesn't fit you must acquit." Well, here's another for you to remember: **If you keep a grudge, you doubt the Judge.**

The final way to battle the unbelief of bitterness is to trust God's purpose to turn the cause of your anger for your good. 1 Peter 1:6-7 says, "For a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

In other words, God allows trials in our lives that could make us very angry. If they couldn't, they wouldn't be trials. But the reason he does is to refine our faith the way gold is refined by fire. This means that the battle against bitterness in the midst of trial is nothing other than the battle against unbelief. Will we look to the sovereign goodness of God, and believe that he means us good in the refining fire? Or will we surrender to unbelief, and let bitterness grow? The choice is yours.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.