

# **THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS**

## **(LESSON SEVENTY-THREE)**

### **“BEWARE OF BITTERNESS”**

#### **EPHESIANS 4:25-32**

*25 Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.*

*26 Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:*

*27 Neither give place to the devil.*

*28 Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.*

*29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.*

*30 And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.*

*31 Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:*

*32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*

In **Ephesians 4:22-24**, the Apostle Paul exhorts the believers in Ephesus to **put off the old man**, be **renewed in the spirit of their mind**, and **put on the new man**.

The expression “**the old man**” is a reference to the unsaved person, totally dominated and controlled by the fallen, unregenerate adamic nature, or, “**the flesh**.” It is a reference to all that we were, as sons of Adam, prior to our conversion.

In contrast to the “**old man**,” the expression “**the new man**” refers to the saved person, spiritually alive, dominated and controlled by the **divine nature**. It is a reference to all that we **are** as sons of God, “in Christ,” **since** our conversion. It is of this “**new man**” that Paul speaks in **2 Corinthians 5:17**: “*So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come!*” (**New English Translation**)

The bridge that leads from the putting off of the “**old man**” in verse **22**, to the putting on of the “**new man**” in verse **24**, is the **renewing of the spirit of the mind** in verse **23**. In other words, it is not possible for us to put on the new man if the spirit of our mind has not been renewed!

Paul is urging believers to allow the Holy Spirit to continually renew their thought processes. This renewal has reference not only to what we believe, but to the transformation that occurs in our affections, our attitudes and our behavior, when we apply what we believe. It is Paul’s desire for every believer to partake of the miracle of a renewed mind which will enable them to have a divine perspective on everything. This renewal points to a radical change in the believer’s thinking as a consequence of the increasing influence of the Holy Spirit over his or her thought processes, so that he or she increasingly sees everything from God’s viewpoint.

The words “*be renewed*” are in the present tense in the Greek, which indicates that the spirit of the mind is continually being renewed. This renewal is an ongoing process that God performs in us as we

cooperate with the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does the renewing as we obey Him by saturating our minds with God's transforming Word of truth and applying it to our lives.

On the basis of believers' **putting off the old man**, being **renewed in the spirit of their mind**, and **putting on the new man**, Paul proceeds to give them detailed exhortations. In verses **25-32**, he mentions **five** specific sins which he urges believers to avoid. We have already considered **four** of them, namely **Lying, Un-godly Anger, Stealing** and **Unwholesome Talk**. Paul informs us in verse **30**, that these sins "*grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom [we] were sealed for the day of redemption*" (**New English Translation**).

In this Lesson, we will consider the **fifth** specific sin mentioned by Paul, namely **Bitterness**. In verse **31** Paul writes, "*Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.*"

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: "*You must put away all bitterness, anger, wrath, quarreling, and slanderous talk—indeed all malice.*"

The word "*bitterness*" is a translation of the Greek word **pikria**: (**pik-ree'-ah**). The word originally meant, "pointed" or "sharp," as an arrow for example, and then more figuratively of what is "sharp" or "penetrating" to the senses, for example, a bitter, pungent taste or smell, and finally what is "painful" to the feelings. It was used to describe plants that produced inedible or poisonous fruit.

The organic compound **Picric acid**, derives its name from the Greek word **pikria**, due to its bitter taste. It is one of the most acidic phenols. Like other strongly nitrated organic compounds, **picric acid** is an explosive, which is its primary use. We may say that bitterness has an explosive impact on the one who nurtures it, as well as on the one on whom it explodes!

In the New Testament, **pikria** is used in a metaphorical sense to describe animosity, resentfulness and harshness. **It speaks of a settled emotional hostility that poisons the whole inner man.** Bitterness is a state of the spirit. It is an unloving condition which never sees any good in anything or anyone, but always finds a way to see something wrong, something defective, something negative. The bitter person harbours resentment and keeps a record of the sins of others.

The first use of the word **pikria** in the **Septuagint** (the earliest existing translation of the Old Testament in Greek), is in **Exodus 15:23**: *“And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were **bitter**: therefore the name of it was called Marah.”* In the **Septuagint**, the word *“bitter”* is translated **pikria**.

**Warren Wiersbe** made the following insightful comments concerning bitterness:

“An unforgiving spirit is **the devil's playground** and before long it becomes **the Christian's battleground**. If somebody hurts us, either deliberately or unintentionally, and we do not forgive him, then we begin to develop bitterness within, which hardens the heart...We should be tenderhearted and kind, but instead we are hardhearted and bitter. Actually, we are not hurting the person who hurt us; we are only hurting ourselves. Bitterness in the heart makes us treat others the way Satan treats them, when we should treat others **the way God has treated us**. In His gracious kindness, God has forgiven us, and we should forgive others. We do not forgive for our sake (though we do get a blessing from it), or even for their sake, but for Jesus' sake. **Learning how to forgive and forget is one of the secrets of a happy Christian life.**”

**Helen Grace Lescheid**, the Ukrainian-Canadian missionary and author, referring to bitterness said: “It grows. **It distorts reality. It keeps us chained to the past.** Like bad air, it pollutes not just the bitter person, but those who come in contact with the person.”

**Adrian Pierce Rogers**, the American pastor and author, made the following comments regarding bitterness: "Now, there is a terrible problem that can blow the joy of the candle of life out in your life and leave your soul in darkness. There is a problem that can hold back revival in [the church.] There is a problem...that can cause brokenness, divorce, and arguments in your home. There is a problem that can keep you from understanding the Bible. There is a problem that can keep you from being a vital, vibrant, and victorious soul-winner. And, that problem is the problem of bitterness..."

Often a bitter person is hostile, caustic, critical, overloaded with resentment, faultfinding, and a person who is angry. Those are often frequently bitter people.

But, sometimes the bitterness doesn't show itself that way. Sometimes the bitterness shows itself by being a crybaby type of person—morose, sad, full of self-pity, and melancholy. Many times these people, when you pull the veil back, are really just bitter people. Or sometimes it shows itself in a person who is cool, aloof, disinterested, and not a participant, but inside they are a seething volcano of bitterness...

Now, I want you to understand also that **Hebrews** is written to Christians. The Scripture here is written to Christians. And, so we need to make certain that we don't think that we're immune to this problem of bitterness. There are many sour saints. There are many caustic Christians. There are many bitter brothers."

The Holy Spirit sheds light on the devastating effects of bitterness, through the author of the epistle to the **Hebrews**. In **Hebrews 12:15** we read the following: "*Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.*" Let us look carefully at what the Spirit of God is saying to us in this verse.

The **New English Translation** renders the verse in the following way:  
*“See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God, that no one be like a bitter root springing up and causing trouble, and through it many become defiled.”*

The phrase *“Looking diligently”* or *“See to it,”* is the translation of a Greek word which literally means “to look upon, to observe, to examine the state of affairs of something, to look after or to oversee.” As believers pursue peace and holiness, they should watch out for each other in order to ensure that none of them falls short of the grace of God.

The Greek word is in the plural, indicating that it is **everyone’s responsibility** to make sure that **no one** fails or comes short of the grace of God.

Brothers and sisters, as members of the body of Christ we are accountable **for** and **to** each other. We have the responsibility of overseeing one another in spiritual matters, so that we may grow and flourish in the grace of God and not come short of it. We must all consciously involve ourselves in the Body of Christ and assume the responsibility of encouraging our fellow believers to persevere in God’s grace. We must also humbly receive their encouragement and admonition. In a very real sense we are our brothers’ keeper!

The words *“fail of”* in the **King James Version**, and *“comes short of”* in the **New English Translation**, are translations of the Greek word **hustereó: (hoos-ter-eh’-o)**, which means, “to be left behind in the race, to fail to become a partaker, to be inferior, to be lacking.”

One early Greek commentator, interprets the word in terms of a journey of a band of travelers who every now and again check up on each other asking, “Is everybody still with us? Has anyone fallen out? Has anyone been left behind while the others have pressed on?” Brothers and sisters, we too are on a “journey” and every so often we must pause and check up on each other!

In **John 2:1-3** we read the following:

*1 Now on the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there,*

*2 and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding.*

*3 When the wine **ran out**, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no wine left."*

**(New English Translation)**

The phrase "*ran out*" in verse **3** is a translation of the Greek word **hustereó**. If our perseverance in the grace of God should "run out" like the wine at the wedding feast in Cana, the effects would be very serious.

**David Guzik**, author of a widely used online Bible commentary on sites such as **Enduring Word** and **Blue Letter Bible**, makes the following remarks relative to **Hebrews 12:15**:

**"We must get right with God's grace. So look diligently to keep both yourself and others from a return to legalism in either outward form or inward attitude that falls short of God's grace, lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble.**

**1** A bitter root is a root that bears bitter fruit...So it is possible for the seed of bitterness to be sown in a community and, though nothing is immediately apparent, in due time the inevitable fruit appears.

**2** Many are corrupted because of bitterness towards someone they feel has wronged them, and they hold on to the bitterness with amazing stubbornness! What they must do is remember the grace of God extended to them, and start extending that grace towards others—loving the undeserving.

**3** A legalistic attitude will always produce a bitterness that defiles many; its emphasis on what we should do for God, before what He has

done for us in Jesus, puts us (and those around us) in a terrible performance trap."

I find it very interesting that the writer of the letter to the **Hebrews**, associates bitterness with a failure to persevere in the grace of God.

Brothers and sisters, we must "*see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.*" The word "*grace*" is the translation of the Greek word **charis**. In its use among the pagan Greeks, the word **charis** referred to a favour done by one person to another out of the pure generosity of his or her heart, with no expectation of reward.

In the New Testament the word **charis** refers to God's grace and favour towards mankind in general or to any individual in particular. This grace and favour is a free act, totally excluding merit or deserving. It is not hindered by guilt, but freely forgives sin. The apostle Paul, in all his epistles, sets grace and works against one another in direct contrast, showing that they mutually exclude one another. Paul argued that the essence of grace is that it is unearned and unmerited.

The word **charis** also refers to the salvation which God provides, which salvation includes **foreknowledge, predestination, justification, sanctification, and glorification**, according to **Romans 8:29-30**.

Brothers and sisters, **grace is God's supernatural provision for our every need, when we need it**. Grace is not some static concept but rather a dynamic force, which totally transforms the believer's life, beginning with **salvation**, continuing on in **sanctification** and all through eternity in **glorification**.

Grace enables a believer to endure suffering and enables our weaknesses to be used for God's glory. When a believer turns away from living by God's grace, he or she must depend on his or her own power, and this inevitably leads to failure, disappointment and frustration. The only way a believer can "fall from grace," is by attempting to live the supernatural life of a Christian in his or her own strength. Paul makes this very clear



in **Galatians 5:1-6**. The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

*1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery.*

*2 Listen! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you at all!*

*3 And I testify again to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.*

*4 You who are trying to be declared righteous by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace!*

*5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait expectantly for the hope of righteousness.*

*6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision carries any weight—the only thing that matters is faith working through love.*

I absolutely love how **The Message** translates the passage:

*1 Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.*

*2 I am emphatic about this. The moment any one of you submits to circumcision or any other rule-keeping system, at that same moment Christ's hard-won gift of freedom is squandered.*

*3 I repeat my warning: The person who accepts the ways of circumcision trades all the advantages of the free life in Christ for the obligations of the slave life of the law.*

*4 I suspect you would never intend this, but this is what happens. When you attempt to live by your own religious plans and projects, you are cut off from Christ, you fall out of grace.*

*5 Meanwhile we expectantly wait for a satisfying relationship with the Spirit.*

*6 For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters is something far more interior: faith expressed in love.*

Brothers and sisters, let me repeat what I stated earlier. As we pursue peace and holiness, we should watch out for each other in order to ensure that none of us falls short of the grace of God. This is the responsibility of every believer. If we do not carry out this responsibility with diligence and Christian charity, it is very likely that a root of bitterness will spring up among us, troubling and defiling many of us!

**The Baker New Testament Commentary**, provides the following observation: “The roots of many weed plants spread rapidly and produce plants in all the places where the roots grow. **These roots develop undetected**; the resultant rapid multiplication of plants is quite unsettling. Roots and plants spell trouble for crop-producing plants that are then deprived of necessary nutrients and as a result yield a reduced harvest. With this picture borrowed from the world of agriculture, the author of Hebrews looks at the church and compares a person who has missed the grace of God (and has fallen away) with a bitter root. Such a person causes trouble among God’s people by disturbing the peace. With his bitter words, he deprives the believers of holiness.”

The Greek word translated “*springing up*,” literally means to spring up in the sense of a seed germinating and breaking through the surface of the ground. It refers to generating, growing up, sprouting or begetting. The use is figurative of course, in this verse.

When a “*root of bitterness*” springs up, it causes trouble. The Greek word translated “*causing trouble*” means to excite disturbance, to trouble, to annoy. The idea is to interfere or bother to the point of

discomfort. The Greek word pictures a person who is continually troubled, harassed, and annoyed by thoughts of how someone else wronged him or her. The offended person is so troubled that he or she is almost emotionally immobilized, unable to move on with his or her life. If he or she does not get help quickly, he or she will eventually be defiled. This is exactly what bitterness will do!

The word “*defiled*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to contaminate, corrupt, defile, pollute, make dirty or unclean.” In the New Testament, the word is used figuratively to refer to cultic and ceremonial impurity which causes something to be unacceptable.

Brothers and sisters, we must always be alert. Every fellowship has some “bitter roots” in its midst who have the potential to infect others with their poison. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews is informing his readers that bitterness is contagious!

Commenting on **Hebrews 12:15**, **Ray Stedman** writes, “Bitterness is always wrong. No matter how justified the cause of bitterness may be, to have a bitter attitude as a Christian is always wrong, **for resentment, envy, and bitterness are always of the flesh**. The trouble is, they are highly contagious diseases. If one person is bitter and continues in an unforgiving, bitter spirit, others are infected by this and it spreads and defiles many. This is the problem in many a church today. So, if you see someone around you that has this problem, help him to see that this is a terrible thing that will wreck his life and destroy the grace of God, thus making it impossible to grow as a Christian.”

**June Hunt**, the founder of the biblical counseling ministry “*Hope for The Heart*,” made the following comments regarding bitterness in “*The Biblical Counseling Keys*:”

"Resentment toward God and those who have not fulfilled your expectations will grow bitter roots that destroy acceptance of yourself and others.

If you don't forgive, you will develop a root of bitterness and a bitter root will grow bitter fruit...You will become bitter.

Unresolved anger produces bitterness. And the Bible links bitterness with being in bondage to sin. (**Acts 8:23**)

Give the situation to God. Jesus understands how much you have been wronged. When He was being persecuted, Jesus knew that the heavenly Father would judge justly...in His way, in His time. And you can know the same. Your trial will make you either bitter or better.

Following conflict, what keeps your heart from a negative focus? Jesus said, '*Love your enemies*'...If you are saying, 'but they really aren't enemies,' realize that if someone evokes resentment, bitterness, or hatred, that person is an enemy to your spirit. Because praying for your enemy is commanded by Christ, believers should obey this directive and not regard this as optional. And because praying for your enemy protects your heart from bitterness, you should want to obey this directive in heart and in deed...And because you are willing to 'bless' your enemy, the Bible says that you will inherit a blessing (**1 Peter 3:9**)."

In our next Lesson we will continue to explore the issue of bitterness, as well as the other negative attitudes and actions that are associated with it.