

**Free to Forgive – getting past bitterness**  
**Hebrews 12:15, Eph 4:25-32**

Friends, once there were two farmers were walking through the countryside. They were on their way to another village to help bring in the crops.

As they walked, they spied an old woman sitting at the edge of a river. She was upset because there was no bridge, and she could not get across on her own.

The first famer kindly offered, "We will carry you across if you would like." "Thank you," she said gratefully, accepting their help.

So the two men joined hands, lifted her between them and carried her across the river. When they got to the other side, they set her down, and she went on her way.

After they had walked another mile or so, the second farmer began to complain. "Look at my clothes," he said. "They are

wet and filthy from carrying that woman across the river. And my back still hurts from lifting her. I can feel it getting stiff."

The first farmer just smiled and nodded his head.

A few more miles up the road, the second farmer griped again, "My back is hurting me so badly, and it is all because we had to carry that silly woman across the river! I cannot go any farther because of the pain."

The first famer looked down at his friend, now lying on the ground, moaning loudly.

"Have you wondered why I am not complaining?" he asked.

"Your back hurts because you are still carrying the woman. But I set her down five miles ago."

Friends, one the most important skills we can learn in life is to be able to set down – to let go of... the things that can cause us to become resentful and bitter.

And the key to mastering this skill is our ability and our willingness to forgive.

If something has happened to us... if someone has done something to us and we do not forgive them we will feel resentment.

The resentment will fester inside us and eventually it will turn into bitterness.

And bitterness is dangerous friends; it's like a computer virus that has infected your system and is spreading itself unseen throughout your operating system.

And although things seem to be running well with your computer for the most part – eventually this virus will scramble your files and programs so badly that your computer crashes and you will have to get some major work done to fix it and recover your data.

That's what bitterness is like friends... and it's what Hebrews 12:15 is warning us about when it talks about *"a bitter root" which grows up and defiles many."*

And I'm not exactly certain why the Holy Spirit nudged me to speak on this particular topic this morning – as I mentioned last week, for me – learning to lead in Blue Worship has been all about not being so calculated and intentional in picking message topics specifically speak to what we are dealing with as a Church...

So whatever the Holy Spirit has in mind for us to receive from the message this morning I'm sure it will be beneficial for us.

Because, friends – if you think about it, there are so many opportunities in our day to day lives for things or people to make us resentful.

It can start out when by just waking up on the wrong side of the bed in the morning right because your alarm didn't go off...

Getting a cold shower because your family used up the all the hot water on you...

Going outside in a rush to leave and having to scrape the ice and snow off the car... and then noticing that the gas gauge is almost empty...

The people in the drive-thru messed up your order...

Your co-worker or your classmates haven't finished their portion of the presentation and you have to cover for them...

Your kids tell you that they have a major project that they have to do for class - and it has to be done for tomorrow!

You've made plans with your friends and turned down other invitations for the evening – but your friends decide to cancel out at the last minute...

There are just so many things that go on in our days that can leave us feeling resentful.

Even doing something good – like helping an old woman get across a river – can become an occasion for feeling resentful.

Last Sunday I ended up helping someone who needed some gas – so I got a small gas can and brought some gas to them, and offered to put it in the car for them.

But last Sunday it was -25 and none of the fittings on the gas can would close tight enough so as I was pouring gasoline into their tank I was also dribbling it all over my hands and on my shoes..

So my little act of kindness had me and my car smelling like gasoline for the rest of the day!!! Not that I'm bitter about it...

But you start to see how many occasions there are during the week where we can become resentful about things that have happened or what someone might have done to us.

And if this is what is happening to us day in and day out – a little resentment here and a little resentment there...

It starts to accumulate and build up and gradually over a few months or a year with-out us even realizing it all that resentment turns into bitterness and it starts to take root.

And when bitterness takes root in our hearts it starts to feed on whatever good and happy things exist there - sucking the goodness and happiness right out of them and draining us of our vitality and joy...

And if that root of bitterness is allowed to “grow up” and stay in our hearts over time – it changes us and shapes us and makes all of who we are “bitter.”

And even our briefest, most casual interactions with others, will leave a bitter taste with them.

Now it’s pretty easy to spot this what it happens in others.

Someone who has become bitter is cynical and hard. They can’t sympathize or empathize with others.

They are sharp, prickly, overly critical, and hard to please – they are difficult people to like or love...

And that bitterness has a “negative impact” on whoever happens to be around them, right? People who are bitter are not nice to be around, they bring us down.

And Hebrews 12:15 go even further, it says that someone’s bitterness can “*defile many.*”

That’s pretty strong language friends – did you ever consider that if you are bitter that you are in danger of doing far more than just pushing people away from you.

Did you know that if you become bitter you can actually ruin, pollute, corrupt or damage other people? Many other people?

Think about how a bitter school-teacher will ruin someone’s faith in the education system... a bitter policeman will destroy people’s trust in the law... a bitter parent will damage their

children's ability to have a functional family of their own... or pass their bitterness on to the next generation.

So that years later... you have people who are bitter about certain events that occurred decades ago, and they did not experience personally - but they bitter and are continuing to pass on their bitterness to their children.

Think about the relationships between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, the English and French in Quebec, between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East...

And look at what the bitterness in some of these situations has lead to – rioting, fighting, bombings, terrorism.

Bitterness defiles many – it can even destroy people...

So the apostle Paul is correct to connect bitterness in Ephesians 4:31 with rage, anger, brawling, and slander and every form of malice.

That's a scary thought isn't it – because you became resentful and bitter... that many other people could be affected – defiled - by that...

So friends – is there anything going on in our lives where we need to be nudged by the Holy Spirit to watch that we don't become bitter?

Hebrews 12 tells us to “*see to it*” and some other translations say “*look diligently*” that no bitter root grows up in our lives.

So, have we been paying enough attention and have we been watching out recently for bitterness?

I'm guessing that the Holy Spirit wants to nudge us to be attentive, and watch for this so that we can guard against it happening to us.

Now what is the best way to guard against this?

Do we focus on making sure that everything is fair for everyone so that there we reduce the chance of someone becoming bitter?

Do we walk around on eggshells trying to make sure that we're not offending anyone, or make ourselves a doormat so that we're not offended?

Do we give full vent to our frustrations and resentments so that we get it out of our system?

No friends... instead the Apostle Paul says to us *"be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."* (4:32)

The good news is friends that if we focus on this – then we will also fulfill the command in Hebrews 12:15 to *"make sure no one misses the Grace of God"*

You see friends; the best way to deal with bitterness is to prevent it from forming and taking root in the first place.

And Hebrews 12 seems to suggest that we have a responsibility to help each other in this matter.

We can help prevent bitterness from taking root in each other's lives by making sure no one misses the grace of God.

So how do we do this?

First, we need to make sure we understand what God's grace really is? Otherwise we won't know if people are getting it or missing it right? Or we might think we're giving it to them but in reality we're not.

Someone once told me simple definition which goes like this – "fair is when you get what you deserve, mercy is when you don't get what you deserve... but grace is when you get something **good** that you don't deserve."

The Good News... God's grace is that he unconditionally loves us and accepts us no matter what we've done, or what we haven't done....

and in spite of the fact that we keep on sinning he keeps on offering us forgiveness in Jesus Christ – over and over again.

And he has promised that one day this world – including us, will be made new, will be made whole again. This is salvation – this is **good** news.

So if we are to see to it that no one misses this – then we need to be passing it on to others in our interactions with them, through our relationships with them, and helping them see how it applies to them.

And friends – if we are experiencing any bitterness in our lives we can't do this - so I think the Holy Spirit wants to do a couple things this morning...

First – to make us aware of how dangerous resentment and bitterness can be so that we become look and deal with any that might be in danger of taking root in us...

Second – once we've cleared up any bitterness... to learn how we can make sure that no one around us misses God's grace!

And the good news is that this starts to happen just by keeping our hearts free from resentment and bitterness.

Because there is so much around us that can cause us to be resentful and bitter – someone who doesn't accumulate it stands out! People quickly notice the difference.

I know it's sort of working backwards, since we've been looking at verse 15 – but go back to verse 14 in Hebrews 12 and it says "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."

Friends - being holy simply means that you are set apart – and in this case set you are apart in that the little annoyances, the irritations and the aggravations of life don't seem to cause resentment and bitterness to build up in you.

And people see Jesus in that – people see God’s grace at work in you through that – it’s a testimony to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

And when you’re free like this it’s not hard to pass on God’s grace to others – it’s not hard to give others something **good** that they don’t deserve.

Sure that cranky receptionist or waitress deserves a rebuke for being so rude... and mercy is to spare her from your sharp reply –

but passing on God’s grace is to give her a compliment on how her blouse really brings out the color of her eyes!

Yes that bus driver comes off calloused and indifferent and you would be justified in calling in a complaint about his customer service – in your mercy you decide to cut him some slack...

but passing on God’s grace would be to tell him thank-you for being on the job everyday helping us get around and get to work.

Yes that driver was in the wrong for blocking the intersection because the traffic was backed up on the other side and they thought they could make it through anyways – and now they are blocking you... and yes they deserve to be honked and gestured at rudely...

Mercy would refrain from that – God grace would be to give them the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps they have to be somewhere really important and they are running late – we’ve all been there right – so you can say a prayer for them that they get there safety and on time...

See to it friends – that no one misses the grace of God...

And you know what happens when you pass on God’s grace in this way? It puts a stop to the bitter behavior in other people and keeps their bitterness from defiling many...

That cranky receptionist is startled out of her bad mood by an unexpected compliment...

The indifferent bus driver is blessed by an unexpected show of appreciation...

The hurried driver finds they suddenly have some unexplained “good luck” in getting across town to that doctor’s appointment on time...

Passing on God’s Grace and forgiveness in this way starts to break down the walls that bitterness puts up to keep other people out - it softens up hard hearts, and restores people’s faith, and makes it possible to bring healing where there has been hurt.

And friends I can’t think of a better example of someone who passes on God’s grace in this way to other people than Johnny the bagger.

Johnny has Down’s syndrome and he worked at the local grocery store in his town – packing people’s groceries for them.

This grocery store had hired a consultant to come in and help the clerks improve their customer service.

She ran a seminar and challenged the staff to think of something that they could do to make shopping at that grocery store a special experience for the customer.

So Johnny went home that night and did some thinking.

The next day he came back and went up to the consultant and told her that his idea was to come up with a thought for the day, write it down on a piece of paper and give it to the customers in their groceries and say “thanks for shopping with us.”

A month later the store manager called the consultant to let her know what was happening in the store.

“You won’t believe this” he said... “The line-up at Johnny’s cash was three times longer than any other line. So I opened up more lanes and told them we could help them in the other lanes – but they all refused to move.

“No thanks” they said “we want to go through Johnny’s lane and get his thought for the day.”

See to it that no one misses the Grace of God...

Friends this morning the Holy Spirit doesn’t want any of us here to miss the grace of God either...

We’re going to ask the band to come back up and move into a time of ministry and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in what it is that we need to do – so that we can pass on God’s grace to each other and experience God’s grace together this morning.