Blinded By Bitterness
Jonah 3:5-4:11

Slide 1
Most of us have heard the story of Jonah and the whale. Where God told Jonah to go to the evil city of Nineveh and warn them to repent of their wickedness or perish.

Jonah didn't want to go so he got on a boat and went the other direction. He believed he could run from God, but God had other ideas and Jonah ended up in the belly of a whale.

It's amazing what spending three days and nights in the belly of a whale will do for your state of mind. Jonah ended up praying and repenting, ultimately going to Nineveh just like God asked.

When he arrived, he preached God's message saying, *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."* The people listened to him, repented and wore sackcloth and ashes. END OF STORY, well, almost.

The end of the book is NOT a pretty picture. It ends with Jonah sitting around in bitterness and hatred wishing he'd never gone to Nineveh; wishing they had ALL died.

In fact, he even had the audacity to rebuke God:

Jonah 4:2, *"He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."*

He wasn't happy and wanted God to know. Jonah was a bitter man.

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But why was he so bitter? The Bible doesn't say, but Nineveh was a nasty piece of work. They were a war-like nation that showed no mercy to those they attacked.

If a city opposed them, they'd not just kill the survivors, they'd dismember them, impale them and do other horrible things to them.

Their actions so frightened other cities that they'd simply surrender rather than face the atrocities of Nineveh.

My guess is, Nineveh had attacked a city in Israel and butchered people that Jonah knew. Perhaps they'd been murdered right in front of his very eyes.

So, he doesn't want Nineveh to repent. He wants them to die. Every last one of them. He's a bitter man and bitterness isn't one of the qualities God likes to see in His children.

In Hebrews 12, God warns us to be careful! There are sins that'll rob us of God's grace.

Even though verses 16 and 17 tells us to beware of sexual immorality and warns against godlessness, verse 12 kicks this list off with perhaps the deadliest of sins known to man: bitterness.

Hebrews 12:15 warns us, *"See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."*

Why do I say that bitterness is perhaps the deadliest of sins? Because bitterness causes trouble. It has caused congregations to split, ruining churches by damaging the name of Jesus - sometimes beyond repair.

Sometimes a person in a congregation will become so angry over an offense they've suffered, or believe they've suffered, that they relentlessly seek revenge.

They struggle to enlist others in their cause, bringing trouble into the Christ's church. They'll defile many because of their bitterness.

A minister told a story about the time that his church asked him to be the Sunday School Superintendent. After praying about it, he accepted the job.

But a few weeks later, it became apparent why the Deacons had asked him to take the job. Nobody else wanted it.

Apparently, there was a couples Sunday School class meeting in the basement that had gotten out of hand.

It was taught by a pair of spinster sisters who had developed such a negative and bitter attitude that they had run off all the men in the class and now it only had a small group of women.

The Deacons had approached the sisters about their behavior, but the ladies defiantly continued to meet in their basement class. What the Deacons wanted the minister to do was dissolve the class. And so… he did.

He said the class literally came at him with claws extended. The two sisters had so engrained their bitterness and sectarianism into that class that their bitterness had defiled the faith of those other ladies as well.

Therefore, the first reason bitterness is so deadly is because it causes trouble and defiles many.

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But why does bitterness attract others? This brings me to my second reason that bitterness is so deadly. Bitterness attracts others because bitterness is essentially a “religious” disease.

Why do I call it a “religious” disease? It’s a “religious” disease, because those who are bitter are convinced that they’re right. They believe that God is on their side!!!

After all, they’re only seeking justice. That other person or group offended them, so they must be made to pay the price. Their desire for satisfaction for their bitterness will continue for ages.

That minister said that for years, after those sisters had been removed from their class, they would continue coming to church. They’d stay for the music but then leave before the sermon.

They did that till they died! Their defiance and bitterness caused them to declare, by their actions, that their bitterness was justified.

Bitterness is a “religious” disease because those who allow it to take root in their souls take God’s throne for their own. They sit in judgment of those with whom they’re bitter.

James warned the church about this in his letter. James 4:11-12, *“Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?”*

Bitterness is a terrible and deadly sin because it causes trouble, defiles others and causes the bitter person to nudge God off His throne and sit in judgment themselves.

That's what happened to Jonah. He wanted justice but he didn't want God's kind of justice. Nineveh had been a wicked and evil city; it deserved to be annihilated. Its people deserved to die.

There may be times when you or I will be faced with the same emotion. We'll tend to be resentful of someone who has mistreated us or someone we care about.

We'll be tempted to despise them and maybe even do what we can to hurt or destroy them.

Someone described bitterness this way: *"Someone who's bitter, is angry and unhappy because they can't forget nor forgive the bad things that have happened in the past."*

Someone else wrote: *"Bitterness starts when we cling to anger and resentment."*

I read a story about the natives of Polynesia who spent a great deal of their time fighting. They had a custom for remembering things others had done to offend them.

They'd take something that belonged to each offender and hang it on the ceiling of their hut.

Then as they laid in their bed each night, they'd look at those items and remember each person, what they'd done and try to decide how to get even.

That's what bitter people do. They spend their time thinking about what others have done to them.

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But we shouldn't allow ourselves to be bitter about what others have done to us. Why?

Ephesians 4:31, *“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”*

Not only does being bitter defile us and robs us of God’s grace, which is something we don’t want, but bitterness and resentment proves we don’t trust God.

Romans 12:19, *“Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.”*

In fact, Proverbs 24:17-18 warns us, “*Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them.”*

When it comes to vengeance, keep your hands to yourself and let God do what He does best. Just stay out of His way.

But there’s another reason we should avoid bitterness, and that reason is that we represent Jesus Christ.

Jonah didn’t realize that, but he also represented Jesus. Jesus compared His own death, burial and resurrection to Jonah’s time in the whale:

Matthew 12:40, “*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”*

So, Jonah’s life was a prophecy of what would happen with Jesus. Jesus would die on the cross and spend three days and nights in the grave.

But the problem for Jonah was that he stopped short of being the example he could've been. Jonah could've been an example of God's forgiveness.

In Jonah 4:2b, Jonah even says that he knew about God's forgiveness: *"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."*

He knew God was merciful; he knew God was abounding in steadfast love; he knew God would forgive Nineveh - he just didn't want God to do that.

He didn't want them forgiven; he didn't them pardoned; he didn't want them saved; he wanted them dead – all of them.

Now Jonah didn't mind when God forgave him. When Jonah was trapped inside that whale he begged to be forgiven and be given a second chance.

But his bitterness and anger blinded him to the fact that the God he served was as patient with him as He had been with the people of Nineveh.

Jonah failed to represent the God he served, and it was not a pretty picture.

Slide 5
Conclusion

A young High School girl named Sally told of one Sunday School class she'd been in. Her teacher was known for his elaborate object lessons, and on that day when she walked into class and knew they were in for another fun day.

On the wall was a big target and on a nearby table were several darts. The teacher told the students to draw a picture of someone that they disliked or someone who had made them angry and he would allow them to throw darts at the person's picture.

Her girlfriend drew a picture of a girl who had stolen her boyfriend. Another friend drew a picture of his little brother.

Sally drew a picture of someone she didn't like very much, and she put a great deal of detail into her drawing.

The class lined up and began throwing darts, and everyone was laughing and joking. Some of the students threw their darts with such force their targets ripped apart.

Sally looked forward to her turn and was filled with disappointment when they ran out of time, and the teacher asked the students to return to their seats.

As Sally sat thinking about how angry she was because she didn't have a chance to throw any darts at her target, the teacher began removing the targets from the wall and underneath the target was a picture of Jesus.

A complete hush fell over the room as each student looked at that mangled picture; holes and jagged marks covered His face, His eyes pierced out.

The teacher closed the class with these words found in Matthew 25:40b, *"Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."*