

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered Down

Tuesday, March 16, 2021

Beware the “Bitter Root”

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

—Hebrews 12:14-15

At a recent pastors’ gathering I was blessed by a fellow clergyman’s devotional which he offered on the *bitter root* of Hebrews 12. It had been years since I had heard this verse expounded, and it is certainly a word for our present day! Its exhortation is to live in peace with *all* people, to be holy, that is, set apart as belonging to God, and not to fall into bitterness. This is a year when we need to hear such a command as we have endured political battles, medical and economic crises, major shutdowns, riots in our cities and even in our Capitol, and a new level of fighting in the culture wars. This is a season which makes for strong opinions and passionate feelings. How we need to be reminded of our call to peace and holiness.

The writer of Hebrews is especially concerned that we not fall into bitterness which is a denial of God’s grace, for if Christ has so loved us, how can we live in hostility to others? This dangerous anti-grace is so artfully described! It is bitter. One may occasionally make a tart remark which can be of benefit, but bitterness is simply miserable and destructive. This deadly poison is like a root, a living and growing extension which can run deep and cause a weed to spread and multiply. Like a dandelion it can be hard to pull out as its tap root runs deep, and like ivy or crabgrass it can spread quickly. We may convince ourselves that our harsh feelings are a personal matter and do not affect others, but this is a delusion. At one time or another we have heard a friend or colleague speak cruelly of another and then follow their remarks with the disclaimer that “this is between Fred and me and has nothing to do with you.” Truth be told, the bitterness is not so easily contained.

As timely as my friend’s message was, it included a confession which made it even more immediate. He told of times of self-examination during which he discovered bitterness in his spirit of which he had been unaware. I was taken aback by this confession as my friend had always seemed to be most gracious and amiable, yet I immediately realized that he was telling the truth. It is easy for us to say, “I may disagree with Susan and have done so on many occasions, but I respect her and

consider her a friend,” but is this true? Many times, it is. Often it is not. There are those who have hurt us (and sometimes this hurt is but the smallest slight) who have created a resentment inside us. Let us all examine ourselves, and beware of the bitter root.

As my friend has freely confessed his weakness I must do likewise. This has been a season when I have repeatedly spoken critically of the leadership class in our modern world and of certain leaders in medical policy, media and politics. It is all too easy to speak critical words with the explanation that “this is nothing personal,” but how true is this disclaimer? As the culture wars again heat up it is hard to not feel animosity toward those who seem to be attacking cherished values. Might there be a bitter root within me? My thoughts are not always kind and differences of opinion can become very personal matters. The bitter root is a real and present danger.

This wise pastor concluded with a call to focus upon the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who loved us even when we were bitterly attacking him. Our closing scripture/prayer is a good start on this spiritual exercise. Along with self-examination and a focus upon grace I would add the instruction of our Lord which has been of great help in my own life. Pray for your enemies. Pray for them, even when your heart may be raging against them. God will do an amazing work in your heart if you persist in such prayer, and who knows what wonderful answers to your prayer God might give!

So, let us love all people, let us be holy, and let us beware the bitter root.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

You have called us, O God, to be your people. You have loved us and chosen us for your own. Clothe us with your compassion, your kindness, your humility, your gentleness and your patience. Help us forgive one another as you have forgiven us. And bind us all together in the perfect unity of your love. —Colossians 3:12-14 (Good News Bible, adapted)