

29. Understanding the Danger of a Root of Bitterness

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children understand the purpose of godly discipline. We saw that God disciplines true Christians to help our lives become conformed to the life of Christ and to make it possible for us to do good works. In order to do good works, we must yield to the Lord and allow Him to work in our lives and through our lives. In our topic today, we are going to see the importance of warning our children about the danger of a root of bitterness.

In our previous topic, we saw that the Christian life is compared to a long-distance race. In such a race, people can get discouraged when they go through times of testing, especially if they do not understand the purpose of that testing. We saw, in the previous topic, that God allows discipline to happen in our lives in order to help us become like Christ. That is why Hebrews 12:12-13 goes on to say, “Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.” In a long-distance race, we need the strength of the Lord to complete the race that the Lord has given to us.

Isaiah used a similar thought to encourage the Jews during his time. Isaiah spoke about the time when Christ would one day come to rule on the earth. However, Isaiah spoke at a time when enemies were coming against the nation of Judah. As a result, Isaiah said, in Isaiah 35:3-4, “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful-hearted, “Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you.” The people of Israel were fearful in the time of Isaiah. Some of the Christians to whom the writer of Hebrews wrote were also fearful as they experienced suffering and opposition from other Jews. They needed to be encouraged in the race the Lord had given them. As a result, the writer of Hebrews used the thought of Isaiah to encourage them.

The Jewish Christians who were wavering and discouraged were encouraged to strengthen their hands which hung down and their feeble knees. They needed to set aside the weights that were discouraging them so that they could run with endurance the race that the Lord had given to them. Just as Isaiah encouraged the fearful people of his day to be strong and not fear because the Lord would come and save, the writer of Hebrews encouraged the Jewish Christians to be strong. We need to encourage our children in the same way when they get discouraged during times of testing. Isaiah said, in Isaiah 40:31, “But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” We also want to encourage our children to let the Lord renew their strength.

Whether Jewish Christians, in the time of the New Testament, or for all Christians today, we want to help them learn to make straight paths for their feet. Galatians 5:16 says, “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” As we show our children how to walk in the Spirit, we are showing them how to make straight paths. In our spiritual lives, we want to help our children learn to experience the healing of the Lord from sin so they can be encouraged.

Hebrews 12:14-16 goes on to say, “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.” The writer of Hebrews reminded the Hebrew Christians, as well as all Christians, that we are to pursue peace with all people. As Christians, we can have peace with other Christians as we walk in fellowship with the Lord and with one another. 1 John 1:3-4 says, “That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.” Then, 1 John 1:7 adds, “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” We will experience peace with one another as Christians as we walk in the light.

Those who are not Christians will only experience peace and holiness in their lives when they come to Christ in repentance and faith. With those who are not Christians, 2 Corinthians 5:20 says, “Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.” Here, we see that we are to plead with those who are not Christians to be reconciled to God. Isaiah 57:19-21 says, “I create the fruit of the lips: Peace, peace to him who is far off and to him who is near,” says the Lord, ‘And I will heal him.’ But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” True peace only comes to people when they repent of their sin of unbelief and place their faith in Christ.

Many Hebrews did not yet have that peace. They were still falling short of the grace of God. As a result, the writer of Hebrews encouraged the people to look carefully and examine their lives to see if they had true faith. That same warning is needed by many professing Christians today. When there is not true faith, we see that it is easy for a root of bitterness to spring up. Moses warned Israel, in Deuteronomy 29:18, to examine their own lives when he said, “So that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood.” Those who turn away from God often become like a root bearing bitterness. We see here, in Hebrews, that such a root will always cause trouble.

There are four roots mentioned in the New Testament, two that are positive and two that are negative. In Colossians 2:6-7, we are told to take root in Christ. In Ephesians 3:17-19, Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be rooted in the love of Christ. In 1 Timothy 6:10, we see that a root of the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil. Here, we see that a root of bitterness can spring up and defile not just the bitter person but many others. The word translated “bitterness” means *extreme wickedness*. In Acts 8:23, Philip spoke to Simon the sorcerer and said, “For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.” Simon professed to be a Christian but showed his heart was still full of bitterness. In Ephesians 4:31-32, all Christians are told, “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.” We see that

bitterness is a very destructive root, because the root always determines the fruit. A bitter person will cause many others to be defiled and cause that person to fall short of the grace of God.

We also have a warning against being a fornicator or profane person. Fornication includes any form of sexual immorality. The word translated “profane” means *ungodly*. 2 Timothy 2:16 says, “But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.” Esau is an example of a person who knew about God but became a bitter and godless person. In the time of Esau, the birthright meant that the person had the spiritual leadership in the family. Genesis 25:34 says, “And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.” Esau was willing to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew, because spiritual leadership meant nothing to him.

In Hebrews 12:17, we read, “For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.” Later, Esau wanted the blessing because that would have given him a double inheritance, but he was rejected. He wanted the material blessings of the world, but he did not want the spiritual leadership because he had become bitter, a fornicator, and a profane person.

The writer of Hebrews was pointing out that Esau was an example of those Jews who professed to be Christians but who lacked true faith. Such individuals were contrasted with those who had true faith in Hebrews 10:38-39. Those verses say, “‘Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.” The word translated “draw back” means to *withdraw because of fear*. Here, we see that there were some Hebrews who had learned about Christ but had drawn back because of their fear of other Jews and never became Christians. We see that they drew back to perdition. The word translated “perdition” means *eternal judgment*. Like Esau, these Jews had learned about the importance of faith, but they had chosen to draw back from faith and continued to depend on their own works to try and earn their way to heaven.

Today, we have many people who are like Esau, and these Hebrews, who drew back from true faith. They have heard about Christ, but they choose to remain in their bitterness, their fornication or their profane lifestyles, even though they profess to be Christians. Such professing Christians who lack true faith face the same eternal consequences Esau faced. They will experience eternal judgment. Revelation 21:8 says, “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” We want to help our physical and spiritual children learn how to warn such individuals, in love, so that such individuals can understand the eternity that they face if they continue to choose to follow sin. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children to understand and explain the danger of a root of bitterness.