

I. Introduction (Hebrews 12:15)

A. The Little Boy

1. A True Story.
2. He doesn't want me?
3. A hot tear escaped his swollen eyelid and rolled down his cheek. Every breath made his chest burn. He clutched his threadbare blanket and covered his head with his pillow. Only the pale moon witnessed the curled-up boy as the sound of another fight penetrated his bedroom door.
4. He told himself it would be okay, but his seven-year old brain knew better. He pushed hard, but his pillow couldn't drown out the noise.
5. Something crashed. His mother cried. His dad shouted. She yelled. They had long since given up muffling their voices for the boy's sake. "Where were you? It's after midnight!"
6. "If I thought you cared about me, I wouldn't stay out so late."
7. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to listen. The boy never understood the fights.
8. Then he heard the words that made his eyes open wide. They shot through his mental fog with piercing clarity. "I want a divorce," said his dad. "You can have the house. You can have the car. You can have the boy. I don't want anything."
9. The boy's mind entered another dimension. The clock on his nightstand ticked in half-time, like it was slogging through sludge. His clenched teeth hurt. He could hear a fly buzzing against the window.
10. *My dad doesn't want me.*
11. That boy received something that day, something he didn't want. He received a WOUNDED SPIRIT.
12. Fast forward: Decades later, happily married with six children and a bubbly granddaughter, his struggles with intimacy seem like somebody else's nightmare. He bears the scars of other people's brokenness, but those scars no longer define him. He's gotten past his bitterness and entered the realms of forgiveness and grace.
13. Another true story.

B. The Little Girl

1. A little girl enjoys a tea party with her dolls. Her mom calls for the third time, "Let's go, and I mean right now! Put your shoes on; we'll be late for church."
2. The girl pauses for a final sip of tea.
3. Her mother bursts into the room. "I said put your shoes on. We're leaving now!" The mother grabs a curly-haired doll, rips the head off, and hurls it across the room.
4. The girl sobs.
5. "I said put your shoes on!"
6. She races to find them. Her mind shuts down. Her eyes can't focus; her mom's voice sounds muffled. Where are my shoes? She looks in the closet where they belong. Her mother screams words at her, but she hears only noise. She scours the hallway with her eyes. She searches under her bed. She can't find them. Her body shudders.
7. "I said put your shoes on!" "But I can't find them!" Then comes the accusation she'd heard a thousand times before: "Why do you have to be so stupid!" Pieces of her heart drop into an abyss. Soon she will seal it shut.
8. Sitting silently at church she examines her distorted reflection in her shiny shoes while her smiling mother sings the hymns. No one suspects the storm savaging her spirit.
9. *I'll show you how smart I am.*
10. Her life tells the tale of an overachiever. She studies hard. Gets the best grades. Flies through college and medical school. Rises to the top. And hates every minute of it.
11. She can't remember why she is so driven. Perfectionism and workaholicism pull apart her marriage. She's trying to impress somebody, but can't remember who. She's shocked to realize that her husband makes her feel stupid, too. What force in her heart made her choose him? A wounded spirit.
12. *Fast forward:* A painful divorce and a faltering reconciliation with her mother inspire a revelation: she doesn't have to accept her mother's unkind labels. She's never had to. She's always had the power to embrace beautiful new labels from God.
13. Today, as a successful doctor, she enjoys helping others tap into that same power. She's made peace with her ex. Peace with her past. She has risen above the the power of bitterness and entered the realms of forgiveness and grace.

II. Ignite

- A. Welcome to Neighborhood and to part 6 of our fall series called IGNITE. The goal has been to fan the flames of whatever God is doing in your life right now. That's so that you can level up — so that you can get unstuck and move forward in whatever ways God is working on you.
- B. Our topic today is this: *Ignite Your Forgiveness.*
- C. And here is our main Bible Verse:
  1. *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; (Hebrews 12:15, NKJV)*
- D. I invite you to think with me today on the topic:

III. FIVE FACTORS IN A BITTER SPIRIT

A. Root Factor

1. *A bitter spirit rests deep inside your soul.*
2. Root is a metaphor, a figure of speech, so we have to decode it.
  - a) It's a root, so *it goes deep inside you.* It reaches into your memories, into your emotions, into your addictions, into your passions, into your relationships, into your depression, into every part of you that makes you limp beneath your dignity.
  - b) It's a root, and *it has taken a long time to grow*, so it reaches into your history and life experiences too.

- c) And it's a root, so *it keeps on growing*, keeps on branching out, touching more and more areas of your life... until it's finally pruned.
  - d) And it's a root, so *you don't see it*. It's not on the surface. You're hardly even aware of it. It's a root, so it's invisible. You don't see the root... you see the fruit... and this fruit is nasty, and bitter, and something in your life that spoils everything... and you might not know where it's coming from.
  3. This bitterness has sunk down deep roots that wrap around all the other roots in the soil of your heart. The root factor.
- B. *Bitterness Factor*
1. What is bitterness?
  2. Bitterness is anger you carry from a past wound or injustice.
    - a) *Bitterness is unresolved anger from the Big Hurt in your life. It's a Wounded Spirit.*
  3. The Big Hurt
    - a) *Loss.*
    - b) *Rejection.*
    - c) *Abandonment.*
    - d) *Absence of early affection.*
    - e) *Trauma.*
    - f) *False Accusation.*
    - g) *Unfulfilled duties.*
    - h) *Life's Unchangeables. (Amy Carmichael, praying for blue eyes.)*
    - i) *Favoritism.*
    - j) *PAST*
      - (1) The emphasis is on the past. When you are bitter, you get locked into a past-tense emotional structure. Your reactions puzzle people, because they seem out of balance. A little thing happens, and you blow up. It's all out of proportion.
      - (2) Why?
      - (3) *Because bitter people aren't just reacting to the problem of the moment, they're reacting to the injustice of a lifetime.*
      - (4) They are chained emotionally to the past, to the day of the Big Hurt. Spiritually, they've been set free, but emotionally, they haven't caught up yet.
      - (5) Yes, they can cope. They have done a lifetime of coping. They've mastered the art of coping. They are successful, they have achieved, they have even risen to the top.
      - (6) But something is missing. Because coping isn't living. The wounded spirit commands them, day after day, and they live with bitterness stinging their throat.
      - (7) The good news is you can rise above the Big Hurt.
        - (a) *For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5, NKJV).*
      - (8) You have mighty weapons available to you through Christ. You don't have to stay trapped in unforgiveness forever. It's never too late, and you're never past hope.
- C. *Trouble Factor*
1. *A bitter person enters Vengeance Mode.* A wounded animal goes back and forth between licking its wounds and lashing out at perceived threats. Same with a wounded spirit. When a person enters the stronghold of bitterness, they flip all the switches in their soul to take care of payback.
    - a) *Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. (Romans 12:19, NKJV).*
  2. Vengeance taken out on others.
  3. Vengeance taken out on self.
  4. A breakdown in the process of grace in a person's life.
    - a) *Pride.*
    - b) *Envy.*
    - c) *Critical spirit.*
    - d) *Self-rejection.*
    - e) *Self-pity.*
    - f) *Isolation.*
    - g) *Hyper-achievement.*
    - h) *Perfectionism.*
    - i) *Performance orientation.*
    - j) *Judgmentalism.*
    - k) *Resenting God.*
    - l) *Never happy.*
  5. Can you see why we have the next words... "and by this many become defiled..."?
  6. A person locked up in a stronghold of bitterness is very hard to love. They don't receive love because they think they're not worthy. They don't give love because you're not worthy. Or because they have never been shown how.
  7. Bitterness causes all kinds of malfunctions and trouble in our lives.
  8. It's only multiplied by the devil:

- a) And “don’t sin by letting anger gain control over you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a mighty foothold to the Devil. (Ephesians 4:26, 27, NLT).

9. Trouble factor.

D. Grace Factor

1. An unforgiving spirit is a result of GDD (Grace Deficit Disorder).

2. Look at our key verse again, and tell me what’s missing...

- a) 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; (Hebrews 12:15, NKJV)

3. When the root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, it is a sign that a person has fallen short of something enormously important. What would that be?

4. Grace.

- a) They have received the grace of salvation, so they are saved, and born again, and adopted into God’s family, and bound for heaven when they die.

- b) They have received the grace of a new identity, so that God sees them just as he sees Christ.

- c) They have received the grace of the Holy Spirit, so God came to live inside them the day they were saved.

- (1) Jesus shed his blood, died on the cross, rose again, ascended to heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God so that he could lavish upon his children an indescribable gift of grace.

- d) Everything that God offers in the day of salvation, all the gifts, all the blessings, all the grace is already theirs. So this cannot be talking about something wrong with their salvation, or losing salvation in the end. That is impossible.

- (1) So what’s it talking about? Where exactly is the grace breakdown?

- (a) When a person embraces an unforgiving spirit, they have installed an anti-grace generator at the center of their emotions, thoughts, and spiritual life.

- e) Hasn’t God forgiven you? Haven’t you sinned against him? Haven’t you abandoned him at times? Haven’t you rejected him? Accused him even?

- f) Yes. Of course. We all have sinned.

- g) And yet, because of Christ and his cross, you possess an unassailable, hard fought, blood bought, perfectly legitimized, everlasting forgiveness from the heart of a God you had offended mightily. That is the grace of salvation.

- h) On top of that, you possess another grace — the grace of a new name, with a new power, and a new identity to do things you were never able to do before... such as to forgive the supernaturally unforgivable.

- i) That grace is right here... today... extended to you... that grace of forgiveness. Take a step forward and receive it.

- j) That’s the grace a bitter person falls short of.

- (1) Be very careful lest anyone fall short of the grace of God.

- (a) Cages:

- i) Picture a long corridor in your mind. It’s dark. It’s creepy. It’s echo-filled and scary. In that corridor, you keep memories. Only these memories are not pleasant memories. They’re sad memories. The people who hurt you.

- ii) Imagine that in that corridor, you have a long line of bird cages, and in each cage, there’s a mini-person who hurt you. Stole from you. Damaged you. Messed with you. It could be a person. An institution. A philosophy... whatever it is.

- iii) You keep those memories locked in cages.

- iv) Every so often, you walk down that corridor with a big stick. And you jab at the memories. You poke and beat on the person who hurt you.

- v) And you get your revenge.

- (1) That’s what I mean by an anti-grace stronghold at the center of your emotions and spirit.

- k) This is what Jesus meant when he said...

- (1) “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.” (Luke 6:37, 38, NKJV).

- l) Jesus is saying that it’s time for you to go down that hallway, open those cages, and set those people free.

- (1) Because if you don’t, the only one who will be locked in a cage is you.

- (a) Gracelessness toward others boomerangs into gracelessness toward yourself. Always.

- (b) Do not fall short of the grace of God.

5. We want to help you do this today in a very special way. I want you to open those cages. I want you to set them free. And I want you to set yourself free.

6. We want to help you take a tangible step of forgiveness. I’ll explain that in a minute.

7. But there’s one more factor.

E. Relationship Factor

1. Forgiveness is mandatory. Relationship is optional.

2. In my years of preaching and teaching, this one roadblock surfaces more than any other.

- a) How can I forgive a person when I can’t trust them any more?

3. Answer: you don’t have to trust them. In fact, if they are dangerous to you or anybody else, don’t trust them.

- a) Forgiveness does not mean you trust a person.

- b) Forgiveness does not mean you like a person.

- c) Forgiveness does not mean you spend time with a person.

- d) Forgiveness does not mean you announce it. "I want you to know I've forgiven you..." And they say, "For what?" And then there's a big fight. Just forgive, and move on. If they ask, tell them, but otherwise, move on.
- e) Forgiveness does not mean that you shield a person from the law. No. Forgive them AND turn them over to the law if it's appropriate. God works through the legal system. So forgiveness isn't permission for bad people to roam the streets.
- 4. The simple fact of love is this:
  - a) *Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:10, NKJV).*
- 5. Aside from turning them over to the law (which you should do)... from your side... Do no harm. Do not harm their reputation. Do not harm their personhood. Do not harm them...
- 6. Why not?
  - a) Because vengeance belongs to the Lord, and he will repay. In the end, every sin is balanced in God's cosmic scales of justice... but that is HIS job, not yours.
  - b) God will repay. He promises. He takes it personally when anybody messes when you, especially when you're a kid.
  - c) He will repay.
    - (1) And you never want to put yourself between the Lord and the whip.
- 7. Bottom line: You don't owe a friendship to anybody, except to your spouse... you should work hard on that one. But everybody else is optional. You have the right to create all the distance you need to stay safe.
- 8. You can forgive a person and cut them out of your life if they are dangerous.
  - a) Because the essence of forgiveness is letting them out of the cage, letting them into the hands of God, and to quit wishing them harm.
  - b) And then, the advanced course — is this:
    - (1) *"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. (Matthew 5:44, NKJV)*
    - (a) But that's for another sermon.

#### IV. The Index Card

- A. Pull out an index card. You can use any piece of paper or anything you can write on.
- B. You've been listening to me talk for a while today. And I have to believe that I've triggered some memories. Painful ones. Sad ones. Memories you've numbed yourself to.
  - 1. You might be sitting here today with a stronghold of bitterness.
  - 2. Unresolved anger.
  - 3. A wounded spirit.
- C. And the person or people who hurt you are happily going their way, and it seems so unfair and so wrong.
  - 1. Unlock the cage.
- D. And our army of lawyers is working overtime to make the case as to why they are so guilty.
  - 1. Unlock the cage.
- E. And the other people in your life don't know why you're so hard to get along with.
  - 1. Unlock the cage.
- F. And you have injuries for a lifetime bottled up inside.
  - 1. Unlock the cage.
- G. How? Choose forgiveness.
  - 1. *This is how you can participate:*
    - a) *Write down on that card the names of those you need to forgive.*
      - (1) *If you want to, you can write down the offenses too.*
    - b) *Fold your card, tear it up and drop it in the trash.*
    - c) *Tell God... TODAY I FORGIVE THESE PEOPLE BY THE POWER OF CHRIST.*
    - d) *Let it go.*
  - 2. *When you do it, I really want you to let it go. The hurts will stay in you, but God can start to heal. When you turn your back on that basket, turn your back on revenge, turn your back on bitterness, turn your back on the anti-grace mode in your heart. This is a time of forgiveness and a return to grace.*

#### V. PRAYER

- A. Our Gracious Heavenly Father, as you have forgiven us, so help us to forgive those who hurt us. In this moment Lord, in this very second, break the stronghold of bitterness in our lives. In this moment Lord, set us free to love again. Let the power of Christ, and the power of your Spirit, so work in us, that will "be kind toward one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God has forgiven us in Christ." Amen.

#### VI. Ignite Wake up call

- A. *"Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18, NKJV)*
- B. *Oh, what joy for those whose rebellion is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the LORD has cleared of sin, whose lives are lived in complete honesty! When I refused to confess my sin, I was weak and miserable, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat. Interlude Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the LORD." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. Interlude (Psalm 32:1-5, NLT)*
- C. *And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. (Matthew 6:12, NKJV)*
- D. *"Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:37, NKJV).*