

Everyone Lights Up A Room

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There are certain statements you hear that stay with you long after the speaker has moved on to the next point. While attending Polishing the Pulpit at Branson recently, I sat in on a lesson about bitterness. At one point, the speaker made a humorous observation. He said, "Everyone lights up the room. Either when you walk in or when you walk out."

The audience laughed, as it was intended to be a lighthearted remark. But I have found myself thinking about those words every day since I heard them. The more I have reflected on them, the more I have realized they touch on a truth the Scriptures have taught all along. Whether we recognize it or not, our presence affects other people.

Bitterness rarely announces itself as bitterness. It disguises itself as being realistic, or having standards, or simply telling it like it is. But Scripture does not let it hide so easily. The writer of Hebrews warns the church to look carefully at one another, "lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled" (Hebrews 12:15). Notice the image. Bitterness is described as a root. Roots grow beneath the surface, unseen, before they ever produce visible fruit. By the time bitterness is obvious to everyone else, it has usually been growing in secret for a while.

And notice what the text says bitterness does. It does not merely bother the bitter person. It springs up and causes trouble, and "by this many become defiled." One root affects many people. This is precisely the picture behind the remark that would not let go. A bitter person does not sin in isolation. Their bitterness leaks into every conversation, every gathering, every relationship they touch. Paul makes a similar point in Ephesians 4:31, listing bitterness alongside wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking, as though bitterness is the soil from which the rest naturally grow. Where bitterness takes root, harsh words and a sour spirit are never far behind.

This is why the room changes when a bitter person leaves it. It is not that people are glad to be rid of them out of unkindness. It is that bitterness carries a weight, and when the weight leaves, people breathe easier without quite knowing why. Solomon observed something similar in a different context: "It is better to dwell in a corner of a housetop, than with a contentious woman in a wide house" (Proverbs 21:9). Whether the difficult presence is contentiousness or bitterness, the effect is the same. Some company drains a room of its peace, and its absence restores it.

The comparison Scripture consistently draws is between the peace that a right spirit brings and the trouble that bitterness leaves behind. James asks a pointed question: "Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?" (James 3:11). The answer is obviously no, and James intends for that to be obvious. A spring produces one kind of water. A life produces one kind of fruit. James goes on to say that if a person shows bitter envy and self-seeking in their heart, they should not deceive themselves into thinking their wisdom is from above (James 3:14-15). Bitterness and godly wisdom cannot coexist in the same heart producing the same words. One or the other will define the atmosphere a person creates.

It would be easy to hear all of this and think immediately of someone else. That temptation is worth resisting. The value of a statement like this is not in identifying who else lights up the room when they leave. It is in asking honestly whether we do. Bitterness is patient and often invisible to the one who carries it. We can grow accustomed to our own sharp edges the way we grow accustomed to a room's temperature, no longer noticing what everyone else feels the moment they walk in.

The good news is that Scripture does not simply diagnose bitterness. It also tells us what to do about it. Paul does not stop at listing bitterness among the sins to put away in Ephesians 4:31. He continues in the next verse: "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). The remedy for bitterness is not simply trying harder to seem pleasant. It is remembering how much we have been forgiven, and letting that forgiveness reshape how we treat others. Bitterness often grows from an unresolved offense, a grudge nursed rather than released. The cross has a way of putting our grievances into proper

perspective. If God was willing to forgive us the debt we owed Him, our own list of grievances against others starts to look smaller by comparison.

There is something worth sitting with in the fact that a humorous remark turned into a genuine examination of the heart. Perhaps that is often how conviction works. It rarely arrives dressed as a sermon. Sometimes it slips in through an offhand comment, takes root quietly, and will not let go until we have dealt honestly with what it revealed. The speaker was right to make the room laugh. He may not have known he was also making at least one listener think, every day since, about which kind of light he brings into a room, and which kind he leaves behind when he walks out.