

## ***Bitter Christians***

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Psalm 52

*“But God will break you down forever...”*

### *Movement 1 – It is a Sick and Twisted World*

There are a lot of messed up people in the world. In the movie, *Chinatown*, Jake Gittes talks about the time he used to work for the District Attorney in Chinatown. He gives the impression that Chinatown is a place that is corrupt, it is broken, and everyone is involved in something crooked. In the tragic end of the movie, Gittes is told to “forget it, it’s Chinatown,” suggesting that it is a corrupt place where corrupt things will happen no matter how hard you try to do and be good. There are many movies that create a place where the town, the environment is twisted, messed up and corrupt. From Chicago in *The Untouchables* to *Tombstone* to *Sin City*, and on and on, these ruff and tumble towns are created by the film industry to give us a sense of hopelessness and wickedness. Maybe there are times when we wonder if the whole world is Chinatown. Maybe there are times when we wonder if there is any innocence left in the world or if we are saturated with corruption. The world is a mess, full of people who seem to be looking out for themselves, looking out to make the next buck, and looking to get on top of everyone else.

It was recently revealed that in China the head of what is the equivalent of the Food and Drug administration was taking bribes to pass inspection requirements for food and medicines. He put the safety of millions on the line for the sake of money. It is a messed up world.

When I was in Mississippi with others from the church we meet one man who bought all the insurance he could possibly purchase for his home. His insurance policy was top of the line, and covered flood and wind damage. He did everything he was supposed to do, and two years later the insurance company still has not helped him out. Two years later, he, his wife, and his two-year-old daughter are still living in temporary housing. It is a messed up world.

There are thousands of children working in sweatshops for pennies a day in dangerous circumstances, and the companies employing the shops make millions off of their labor. We want to give money and resources to struggling third world countries, but the politicians, the government often keep the money for themselves. Drug dealers are producing their drugs in such a way that the colors, the shapes, and the packaging will appeal to younger children so that they will be addicted early. The crime rate is up. Politics seems to be focused on lining the pockets of the politicians, not serving the people. I could go on and on. It is a sick, twisted, messed up world we are living in.

It is a dog eat dog world literally. It is a world where there seems to be an unnamed acceptance of one pushing down others in orders to get ahead. It is a world of lies, deceit and of sin. *The Godfather* movies are in essence about the corrupt values of a family mixed with a desire for love and fidelity. In those movies, the main characters speak about family, they speak about love and honor, yet when push comes to shove, they would sell out their own brother, or have an uncle killed for the sake of business. It is a movie that portrays the mixture of a surface decency and of true corruption. This is just a

movie and we enjoy the drama, but when I watch any of the reality shows, I find very similar values that I find in the *Godfather*. People claim allegiance to their own groups, but then will sell out, lie to, or just manipulate in order to win. This is a twisted, faulty, and sick way to live and it seems to be accepted in our world.

When we read the beginning of this psalm we are pulled into the life of the corrupted and the sinful. Read about this mighty individual who has plotted destruction, who lies, who is involved in treachery, who loves evil more than good and lying more than speaking truth. Read about this individual who would trust in riches and would seek refuge in wealth rather than trusting in God. Read about this individual who lives a life of sin and think about the world today. Who could this individual be? Could this person be the president of a company? Could this person be a politician? Could this person be a gangbuster, a dealer? It almost seems too easy to consider a contemporary person to fit the description of the psalm, because the world is saturated with lying, with manipulation, and with ungodly acts. It is easy to read this psalm and to create a picture in our own mind of this individual. It may be a nationally known person, or it may be someone you know from work, from school, or even from your neighborhood. We know about these wicked and unrighteous people. It feels like the world is saturated with twisted and unrighteous people. It is a messed up world.

### *Movement 2 – The Smug Satisfaction of Hell*

We have the satisfaction of knowing that they are going to pay... eventually. We have the satisfaction of knowing that some day the wicked will pay for their sinful lives. Have you ever been to a Christian haunted house? They are often called “hell houses” or “judgment houses.” These exhibits have been created in response to the secular haunted house, and try to show people what would happen if someone lives a sinful life; eventually, the sinner ends up in hell. It shows the sinners writhing in pain, suffering because he or she lived the aforementioned life. The purpose of the house is to show the sinners, the unbelievers what they have coming, to scare the sinners into accepting Christ as savior, and to give many Christians an opportunity to look on with a smug sense of satisfaction. And maybe, maybe it makes us feel good. Maybe we find some sense of justice knowing that those who work hard, who try to be righteous, who try to do what is right, who fear the Lord and still struggles to get on in life, that we will eventually be able to stand on our moral rock, our righteous rock and look down on those who have lived an iniquitous life squirming and suffering in hell. Maybe we get some level of a smug satisfaction as we watch the sinful melt like ice under the divine judgment of the Lord.

When I was at Oberlin, two itinerate preachers, Brother Paul and Brother Jed would stop by, just outside campus and would preach a message of hellfire and brimstone. They would tell the students that they were sinful. They would tell the women that they were not dressed modestly enough. They would tell the men that they should be going to church. They would condemn all of the campus to hell, and when someone would ask them if they knew where they were going, Brother Paul and Brother Jed would get that smug look on their face, a slight grin would show, and they would say, “well I’m going to go to heaven to watch you burn.”

Maybe we don’t want to go that far, but isn’t it good to know that ultimately we rest in the righteousness of the Lord. Isn’t it good to know that we can rest on the promise of the Lord, the support of the Lord? Maybe we don’t have a lot of money. Maybe we

don't have a place of power. Maybe we aren't considered important. But we can rest on the Lord who promises steadfast love forever and ever. So we can look at those who seem to be doing well in life because they have lied and cheated and know that everything will work out in the end. We can look at the wicked and the sinful and feel a sense of satisfaction knowing that ultimately we will be in the right with God, and the wicked will suffer.

When Enron fell and those in charge were arrested, so many said they were getting what they deserved. When Milosevic, Hussein, and other dictators were taken from power and imprisoned many said they were getting what they deserved. When the poor man Lazarus went to heaven and looked down at the rich man suffering in the flames of hell, many said that he was getting what he deserved.

We could get ahead in life through lying, through manipulating, and through holding others down, but we don't engage in these acts of iniquity, and we don't necessarily get ahead. It is good to know that there is justice. It is good to know that there is righteousness, and that those who live a life of evil will pay for their lives. So even as we live in this twisted, this broken world, we can find a kind of satisfaction knowing that eventually they will get what they deserve.

### *Movement 3 – An Unsettling Feeling*

Yet something does not settle well with this approach. Something does not settle well with this kind of siege mentality as we close ourselves off to the wicked of the world. Something does not feel right about this “leave them to weep” kind of approach. Something does not feel right about waiting for the time when we can point and laugh at the suffering of the wicked. It does not feel like we would be taking the call of Christ to the fullest. It does not feel as if we would be following the walk of Christ seriously if we walk past the wicked muttering to ourselves under our breath that the day will come when we will laugh because they did not take refuge in the Lord. When we look down at the suffering of the wicked, will pity fill our eyes, or will a sense of righteous indignation? When we hear the cries for help from the very ones who pushed others down will we laugh, or will our hearts be torn?

Think of Jonah. Jonah was called to go to Nineveh, a city that was wicked to the core. It was a city that, like *Chinatown* was corrupt, broken, and no one was honest. Jonah was called to go and to tell them that God was going to strike them down because of their wickedness. Jonah was going to tell them just what this psalm had stated; their boasting, their pride, and their power were going to fall because of the actions of the Lord. For three days Jonah walked through the city declaring the doom and gloom. And when he was done with his preaching and his prophesying then Jonah went to a hill over the city and watched and waited. Jonah went to the hill waiting for that moment when he could say, “I told you so.” Yet the people repented, the people turned and Jonah was bitter. Jonah was looking for a show and saw contrition. It wasn't right for God to give mercy to such a fallen group of people. It wasn't right for God to offer forgiveness to the wicked. These people deserved to be punished by the Lord! Sit up there with Jonah. Look over the corrupt CEOs, the politicians, the murders, and the dealers all gathered together. Do you want to hear the sound of repentance or are you waiting for that grand thunderclap of God's judgment.

The popular series *Left Behind* has come out with a video game a couple of months ago. One of the tasks of the game is for the repentant Christians to find a heathen, try to convince that heathen to convert, and if he or she does not convert, then to blow them away. It is again as if we are laughing at the sinners saying, "I told you so."

Is this the approach we want to take? Do we want to set up the church as a place where only the righteous are welcome? Do we want to practice our Christianity in such a way that we make sure we are saved and then watch and wait for the lightening of the Lord to bring down the wicked metaphorically or literally? Do we want to read this psalm through the eyes of a bitter Christian, ready to declare that the wicked are only getting what they deserve? Remember when the AIDS epidemic started? How many Christians said that those who contracted AIDS were only getting what they deserved because of their sinful actions? Even those who contracted AIDS through an infusion were labeled as outcasts and sinners because God must be punishing them for something.

Something about this approach leaves me unsettled. Something about letting the bitterness of the righteous be the prevailing attitude in the church does not work well for me. In his book *Remember the Poor* J. Rieger talks about personalizing the poor, avoiding calling them the "other." He claims for us to love the poor we need to see the poor as children of God. What if we were to do that with the wicked as well? What if we were to personalize the wicked? What if we were to avoid calling them the other, but instead to look at the wicked with different eyes, then the eyes of a bitter Christian? Wringing our hands and waiting for someone's downfall and destruction seems to be an approach that does not settle well.

#### *Movement 4 – Reaching out to the Wicked*

Christ calls us to love our enemies. In Matthew 5:44, Jesus calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We are called to love our enemies.

When David was on the run from Saul he had an opportunity to take Saul's life. David, the great warrior, the beloved leader of the people was reduced to a common outlaw because of Saul's jealousy, fear and wicked spirit. So David had been running, and hiding and fearing for his life. Yet one night, while hiding in a cave, David heard Saul and his soldiers nearby, just outside of the cave. When Saul was alone, David was able to sneak up on him, and had the opportunity to take Saul's life. It would have been justified. After all, Saul was unjustly chasing David. After all, Saul was failing as a leader. After all, David was the one anointed by the Lord to be the next king of Israel. So it would have been expected for David to take Saul's life, and to say to him that he was getting what he deserved. You could almost hear David reciting this psalm as he drew closer and closer to Saul, waiting to look over and laugh at his adversary. Yet something made David stop and hold his hand. Maybe David was remembering the times he was with Jonathan, Saul's son and his beloved friend. Maybe David was remembering the times when he would play the harp for Saul, and saw the sorrow in Saul's eyes. Maybe David could no longer look at Saul as just an adversary who deserved to die, but as a person, as the king, and as a child of God, and could not raise his hand. In that moment, David loved his enemy and blessed the one who persecuted him.

Remember the story of the Good Samaritan from last week? We are called to love our neighbor, even if that neighbor is a wicked, sinful person. We are not called to continue walking down the road, laughing at the man on the side of the road saying, "you

are getting what you deserve.” We are not called to be a bitter Samaritan looking for a way to put down our enemies. We are not called to avoid the wounds of the wicked, but to still love them and take care of them. We are called to stop and to personalize the wicked, even if we are the ones who have been hurt by their actions. Jesus calls us to love our enemies.

When the wicked fall, when the proud are brought down, when the powerful lose their place of power, can we sit with them in their sorrow? Can we walk down from our rock of righteousness and be with the suffering, regardless of the reason for their suffering? Can we be like the mouse that removes the thorn from the lion, its enemy? Can we stay in the presence of the wicked even as they continue to live a wicked life? A good friend of mine was a minister in Dayton. While he was there he was very involved in a street ministry; he would walk the more dangerous streets at night, being present with the dealers and the prostitutes. He got to know people who were involved in sinful acts, and was present for them. He reached out to the wicked. He loved his enemies.

I am asking you to feed the very hand that bites you.  
To not be bitter but be compassionate.  
To not vilify but to personalize.  
To not look with scorn but to look with love.  
To lose our indignation and take on reconciliation.  
To not shut them out, but to reach out.  
To not condemn, but to evangelize.  
To not hate but to love.  
Christ calls us to love our enemies. Can we respond to this powerful and challenging call of love?

#### *Movement 5 – Speaking Truth to Power*

Yet we are called to love with a prophetic witness. We are not called to passively love and stand by the wicked in silence. We are not called to allow sinful and evil actions to occur and continue to occur. We are called to love in a way that speaks truth to power.

Look at this psalm again. It is not necessarily a psalm that speaks to the wicked after they have fallen, but one that speaks to what will happen. It is a psalm that looks to the future, and speaks of a future truth. Image the psalmist confronting his friend and saying, “why do you boast, mighty one, of mischief done against the godly?” and continuing to name all the wrongs that have been done by this individual. Then the psalmist speaks the truth that will happen if the wicked does not change his ways. “God will break you down forever; he will snatch and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living.” These are prophetic words of power. These are words of truth that can be spoken in love.

The prophets spoke truth in love to the wicked. Next week we are going to hear some of the words from Hosea. Hosea was a prophet that spoke to the people of Israel who had turned from God. With powerful imagery, Hosea names the evil that the people are living, and pleads with them to turn back to God. With the powerful polemic of a prophet Hosea warns the people of what will happen if they continue to live in their evil ways. I believe this is the kind of speech that the psalm is calling us to have. We are called to say to the wicked, to the fallen to the wayward that their reliance on wealth over

God will only lead to sorrow and suffering. We are called to say to the powerful that their neglect of others will only lead to their own demise.

The biblical scholar Walter Wink says that “Jesus abhors both passivity and violence as responses to evil. . . . Jesus did not tell his oppressed hearers not to resist evil. That would have been absurd. His entire ministry is utterly at odds with such a preposterous idea.” We are called to speak truth to power, to name the acts of evil and to approach them and call them to become right with the Lord. Let God work through us to be the guiding hand of God.

I have a friend who went to Harvard Business School and planned to work in the corporate world. I asked him how he was going to reconcile his faith in a world that seldom recognizes Christian ethics, morals and beliefs. He told me that he would call companies to a higher standard, that he would work to change the companies and to bring them into the favor of the Lord. This is speaking truth to power in love.

This is befriending a bully, but demanding a better standard of living for the bully. This is creating boundaries with the family member who is hurtful or rude. It is a common Italian practice to not speak to someone who has wronged you. It is a common Italian practice to cut someone out of the family because of his or her actions. When we adopt this bitter kind of action as Christians we are in essence cutting someone out of the family of God, and we lose the power to speak the truth through love. We are called to reach across the divide, and to confront and call the person back to the path that leads to the grace of God. This is not being bitter but being a Christian who takes a chance and shows love. We are called to be a prophetic witness with love.

#### *Movement 6 – Sharing God’s Promise*

And ultimately share the hope of God’s promise. We are to share the promise that we rest on, the promise that we hope in, the promise of God’s faithfulness and God’s grace. Let’s share that hope and that promise. This is the promise we find in the psalm that we can trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever. That we can proclaim the good name of God, and that we will be like a green olive tree in the house of God forever and ever. This is this promise we can share, this is the hope we can offer.

When Paul was taken into prison he did not despair. When Paul was taken into prison he did not yell bitter words at the guards for their sinful lives. Paul was oppressed, in the darkness of the cell, and yet did not lose hope, and shared that hope. He sang hymns, he prayed, and he knew that he could rest on the steadfast love of the Lord. Further, Paul shared this hope with the jailor. Paul did not keep this hope for himself, but shared it with others, so that others would have the opportunity to experience the grace of the Lord.

Like a rock in the stormy water we rest on the promise of God’s grace and God’s presence. Share that promise with the wicked. Many will be looking for something to rest on. When one lives a life of sin and leaves that life, where does one go? Many rest in a life of sin because it gives them a fleeting hope, a limited hope. We can offer a true hope in the Lord, but if we don’t share it, then how can we expect the wicked to change? Bring them to the Lord. Bring them to the grace, the glory and the love of the Lord.

Think of the addict who is trying to recover. When life gets hard, when life gets difficult, where can that addict go to find strength? We can neglect the addict, saying he is getting what he deserves, or we can share our strength, the strength of the Lord.

It is a messed up world. It is a world full of people living sinful lives. It is a world full of people who are taking advantage of others, who are holding others down and hurting others. We can retreat into the church, we can retreat into our faith and wait for the Lord to cast judgment on the world. We can create a fortress of faith where we can watch the rivers of destruction flow through the streets cleaning out all those who are living lives of sin. Or we can face the truth that we are a part of the world as well. We can recognize that we need God's mercy just as much as those we label as wicked. We can accept the grace of God through Christ as a broken people, and then we can enter into the world, and call people to a new life, a higher life. When life gets difficult as we know it will, when we fall back into sin, when we are oppressed and beaten down they will look at us and ask, where do we get our strength? They will look at us as ask what should we do to survive if we can no longer rest in our wealth? Where do we find our hope?

May we say with one voice that we rest on the promise of the Lord. We rest on the steadfast love of the Lord. We find peace knowing that when we turn to God with a heavy heart we receive forgiveness. We find hope knowing that when the waves of the world are threatening to pull us down into the deep, God will not leave us. We can say that it will be well because of the presence of the Lord. We can say that it will be well because of the promise of the Lord. We can say that it will be well because of the grace of the Lord.

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like a sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

We need this hope. The wicked, the fallen, the lost need the witness of this hope. And we rest that in the end it will be well with our soul.

AMEN