

Chapter 7

Decisions That Bind Us

Inner Vows

As discussed earlier, judging is the first and primary sin that causes bad fruit in our lives. There is a second related sin which holds us in bondage, which we call an Inner Vow. It is a close cousin to judging, although it has its own features. An Inner Vow is usually present whenever there is a Bitter Root Judgment.

George, a ten-year-old boy, has a father who is a very angry man. His father's inner anger is taken out on George, his mother, and his siblings. George comes to hate his father, and he judges him. So the consequences of the first sin of judging takes effect and will cause him trouble later in life. But at some point George also says to himself, "I am never going to be like my father." George has just made an Inner Vow, and this compounds and expands his future problems.

The judgment against his father is sin, and it plants a bitter root that will grow inside him and produce bad fruit in his life as a result of the operation of God's law. It is simply the way the spiritual universe works.

But he has compounded his problem by taking his life into his own hands. George decides that he will never be like his father, whom he despises. He has just entered into bondage. What will likely happen in George's adult life is that usually he will not get angry, because the Inner Vow represses his anger. But now and then he will explode in a fit of rage, and those around him will be wounded. Afterwards he will be angry with himself because he has just acted exactly the way his father did!

During those times when he is successfully repressing his anger, other people may sense the anger seething below the surface, but George will be unaware of it. After all, he has decided that being angry is bad, and he doesn't want to admit to himself that he has anger inside. In Chapter 11, "Emotions Are Your Friend," I will talk more about emotions, their nature, and how they behave.

The problem for George is that he is locked into this pattern of behavior. He hates it, but he is powerless to change it. He is again reaping from the operation of God's law, but in a slightly different way.

The Nature Of An Inner Vow

The rigid features of "always" or "never" lock us into a specific mode of behavior, in the same way that a railroad track keeps a train on a specific route. A railroad track goes from point A to point B. If the engineer wants to turn off somewhere in between point A and point B, he is unable to do so, because the railroad track follows a specified path and doesn't go anywhere else.

An Inner Vow is a decision that we make that contains the words "always" or "never".

Similarly an Inner Vows doesn't allow for any divergence from the "path" specified by the person's declaration.

We all realize there are things in our lives that need changing, and at times we make decisions to change. We often call these decisions "New Year's Resolutions." We all laugh about them, because we have all made them and usually we can't keep them. Why are these decisions so puny while the Inner Vows are so powerful?

The difference between the New Year's Resolution and an Inner Vow is that the resolution was made with our head, whereas the Inner Vow was made with our heart. The way the Inner Vow got into our heart was that at the time we made it we were very much living from our heart. We were in a state of bitterness, and our emotions were greatly stirred. When we made an Inner Vow we were judging, and it is the power of the sin of judging that gives the Inner Vow its power.

It is important to note that many Inner Vows are not consciously spoken or even thought. This is especially true with small children. Even though they may not yet know how to talk, they can still make Inner Vows.

However, there was another powerful dynamic going on when we made the Inner Vow. At that moment we were taking our life into our own hands. We decided that nobody else was going to rescue us from this awful situation, and so we were going to have to

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take control of our own life.¹ Thus we judged God and we were presumptuous. In our opinion God was not fixing the situation, so we needed to do it. We presumed that we had the ability to protect ourselves with our own power. This sin is a cousin to judging.

Remember that when we judge another person we are usurping God's role, because we don't trust Him to be the just judge. In the case of an Inner Vow, when we decide to do it ourselves, we are again usurping God's role. We do this because we don't trust Him to take care of us. Right from the Garden of Eden there has been a tendency for man to want to be like God, to take His place.² This was the source of our "God-wannabe."

In the moment when we don't trust God to be our protector, we decide to take control and to be our own protector.

The Inner Vow itself is not sin, because we have a right to make decisions. But at the time that we make an Inner Vow, we have bitterness in our heart. In that moment we don't trust God to be our protector, and we decide to take control. We decide to take God's place and to be our own protector.

When we do that, we are in sin.³ When we sin in this way, our willpower no longer has authority over the decision that we made in our moment of bitterness. In that moment of bitterness, a bitter root was planted in our heart. A spiritual event occurred, writing the decision in our heart. Now that decision is no longer under the authority of our own power. God's laws are now impelling it to operate as we had decided. After this point we cannot decide to renounce it and make it stop operating. From then on it will direct our life, perhaps making us do things we no longer want to do.

¹ See **Endnote #7-1** for more about the feeling that accompanies the making of an Inner Vow.

² **James 4:12-16** links these two sets of sins: judging and being self-willed: *There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another? Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.' But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*

See **Endnote #7-2** for more details on such boasting.

³ One can now see how Inner Vows have a close relationship to Judgments. In both cases we don't trust God to do the job, so we jump in to take over, to do it ourselves.

Summary Of Features Of An Inner Vow

1. An Inner Vow is a decision we make that contains the words "always" or "never."
2. Therefore, an Inner Vow is rigid and locks us into specific behaviors.
3. The most powerful ones were made when we were very small.
4. They are often forgotten by our conscious mind, or were never verbalized or consciously made.
5. Often we only know that an Inner Vow is present because of the bondage in our life.
6. An Inner Vow is always connected to a Judgment. There may be several Inner Vows connected with one Judgment.

Once the Inner Vow is etched in our heart, it operates unconsciously and almost irresistibly.

How To Stop The Operation Of An Inner Vow

The power of an Inner Vow in our life can be broken. Since sin is what gave it power, first we need to deal with the sin. But what sin? Remember that when we made the Inner Vow we were in the process of judging. Then we committed the second sin, of being our own God – "I will do it myself."

To break the power of the Inner Vow in his life, George needs to do the following:

1. First, he needs to recognize that he judged his father, forgive him from his heart, and receive forgiveness from God.
2. Then he also needs to recognize how he judged God (because He wasn't protecting him the way he thought God should) and decided to take his life into his own hands. He then needs to forgive God from his heart and receive forgiveness from God.
3. Next, George can successfully renounce the Inner Vow. He would say something like this, "In the Name of Jesus, I renounce the decision that I made to never be like my father. It had been written in my heart, and Jesus, I ask You to erase it and to set me free, so that I can be free to obey You."

How does he know that he has been successful? The rigid behavior will stop. George will be able to be appropriately angry at the appropriate time, and the outbursts of rage will stop.

Again I want to emphasize that this is not a formula, or a rote prayer. The example I have presented simply lays out the principles, but we do need to say the appropriate words that the Lord gives us to speak.

A Common Fear

Sometimes people are afraid to renounce their Inner Vows. Because George wants so desperately to not be like his father, he may find it difficult to renounce his Inner Vow. He is afraid that if he does so, he will become like his father. That would be intolerable (even though he currently acts like him anyway). But what actually happens when he is set free of the bondage of the Inner Vow is that he is free to feel the anger when it is present. After all, the anger was always present, but previously he wasn't free to feel it. He needs to feel it so that he can recognize that he has judged the person who currently transgressed him, and then he can process it by forgiving and being forgiven. I will speak more about this in Chapter 11, "Emotions Are Your Friend."

What About "Good" Inner Vows?

When George said "I will never be like my father," he might also have said "I will always be nice." What is wrong with this vow? Isn't it a good thing to always be nice? Sometimes we are reluctant to see that a "good" Inner Vow is a problem, but Inner vows always create difficulties for us. For instance, George has his car repaired and the mechanic overcharges him by \$50. If George has made an Inner Vow to always be nice, it will be impossible for him to confront the mechanic, because that wouldn't be "nice." So he may rationalize his behavior: "Oh, well. It's only \$50, and I know he has a family to support, so I won't say anything." It would be appropriate to ask the mechanic politely about the overcharge, but the rigidity of the Inner Vow interferes with George's ability to do this.

George may also rationalize that it is good to be "nice," and so a "good" Inner Vow is OK. However, Jesus never told us to be "nice." Was He "nice" when he called the scribes and Pharisees "*a brood of vipers*" (Matthew 3:7), or called them "*whitewashed sepulchres*" (Matthew 23:27)? Was He "nice" to the moneychangers when He

overturned their tables in the temple? He didn't tell us to be "nice," but to be "loving," and there is a very big difference between the two. It was because of His love for His Father that He cleansed the temple.

This "good" Inner Vow that George made was based upon sin, and therefore it is not "good." We need to be free of anything that is based upon sin and bondage. Therefore we need to be free of all Inner Vows, including "good" ones.

"Good" inner vows compel us to establish our own righteousness, whereas Jesus came to express His righteousness through us. We need to be free to let Him do this, rather than to be locked into our own decision which may be different than what the Lord wants.

How To Know That An Inner Vow Is Present

There are two ways to identify the presence of an Inner Vow.

- **Directly.** Recognize the presence of the Inner Vow by the symptoms it produces in our life - rigid behavior that we hate.
- **Indirectly.** When we have identified a Judgment, then look for any Inner Vows that may be attached to it.

Identifying An Inner Vow Directly

Inner Vows lock us into rigid behaviors. Any time we find ourselves doing things we don't want to do and we find ourselves unable to stop the behavior, an Inner Vow is probably present. This sounds a lot like the reaping from a root of bitterness, and it should. Any time there is an Inner Vow, it is linked to a Bitter Root Judgment. They work as a unit to produce the rigid behavior. Therefore, any time we identify an Inner Vow, we need to look for the Judgment that gave rise to the Inner Vow.

Once we can identify the Judgment we can remember the event where we were wounded and we judged. Then we can likely remember the words that we uttered when we made the Inner Vow. It is also possible that we cannot consciously remember making an Inner Vow, or exactly what we said. But the rigid pattern in our life will give us a clue to what we said.

Identifying An Inner Vow Indirectly

The second way to identify the presence of an Inner Vow is to start with the judgment and track back to any Inner Vows. When we realize that we have judged another person, then look for any Inner Vows that are connected to it. At the moment that we judge, we almost always make an Inner Vow, or several Inner Vows.

George may have made three (or more) Inner Vows at that moment of bitterness, such as, "I will never be like my father," "I will never get angry," and "I will always be nice."

Therefore, be sure to keep in mind that whenever we identify an Inner Vow, there is always a Judgment that preceded it. This is always true, because it is the Judgment that gave the vow the power to be written in our heart and to thus become an Inner Vow. On the other hand, when

we identify a Judgment, there is usually, but not always, at least one Inner Vow present.

Consequently, to erase an Inner Vow we must first take away the power that wrote it on our heart - the Judgment. We do this by forgiving and being forgiven by Jesus.

Honoring Parents

There is another factor that can also cause trouble for us. The fifth commandment says to honor your father and your mother that life may go well for you. Since this is the way the spiritual world works, you need to honor them, or life will not go well for you. Clearly, George would find it very difficult to honor his father. It may be especially hard for him to do this because he doesn't really know what God is demanding of him. Perhaps he thinks this commandment is telling him that he needs to ignore all the hurt that his father inflicted on him. His misunderstanding gets in the way of his being able to honor him. But not being able to honor his father will cause bad things to happen in his life regardless of the reason why he can't honor him. Thus it is crucial to understand what God meant when he gave this commandment.

I briefly mention this commandment here to contrast it to Judgments and Inner Vows. The fifth commandment is a special operation of the laws of God, and it is distinct from Judgments and Inner Vows. Because of its importance, the next chapter is devoted to honoring our father and mother.

Summary

An Inner Vow is a mechanism that is always linked to a Bitter Root Judgment. Working together they cause us to do the things we don't want to do. When an Inner Vow is operating, it produces rigid and inflexible behavior, and our willpower is unable to overcome it. All Inner Vows, even "good" ones, need to be removed. Otherwise they will hold us in bondage, and they will obstruct our ability to obey Jesus.