

How to Beat Bitterness

In our study of the book of Ruth, we've seen that Naomi changed her name to Mara, meaning "bitter." Naomi complained that God had dealt very bitterly with her, and that God had afflicted her.

Most of us have experienced affliction. We've seen disasters, tragedies, sorrow, pain, and death. The older you get, the more often you are associated with affliction.

Last week I spoke about how to understand God's relationship to pain, disaster, and suffering. The Bible helps us understand that God in his sovereignty allows us to experience tragedy and disaster. We believe all things are under God's control, and that God has a morally sufficient reason for the things he allows to happen. God's ultimate plan is to eradicate pain, sorrow, tragedy, and death.

But until we get to heaven, we have to deal with this fallen world, which is full of disasters and calamities. How do we endure these trials and tribulations without becoming bitter? When we are hurt by wicked people or by natural disasters, how do we avoid feelings of bitterness?

First, let's define bitterness. Bitterness refers to strong feelings of hatred, resentment, and distrust; bitterness is "hurt that one holds." A typical response to calamity, pain, and loss is animosity, anger and resentment—i.e., bitterness.

Bitterness comes from a refusal to forgive or to handle pain biblically. The sense of having been wronged becomes life-dominating for the bitter person. Anger and resentment over past difficulties seems to color all of life. Bitterness often so controls a person that he sins in many other areas.

Personal bitterness rarely remains contained in the bitter person. Bitterness usually affects others. "A bitter root bears bitter fruit."

How do you know if you are bitter? Ask yourself the following questions:

- ? Do minor problems cause heated responses? Do you get angry over minor issues? Do you get angry easily?
- ? Do you keep a mental (or physical) list of the wrongs people have done to you? Do you dwell on the wrongs you've suffered? Do you plot revenge against those who have hurt you?
- ? Do you desire to prove yourself correct and prove others wrong?
- ? Do you enjoy being angry? Is anger your normal, common emotion?
- ? Do the misfortunes and troubles of others make you happy? There's a German word, Schadenfreude (shoden-froida), that means joy over harm or misfortune suffered by another. Bitter people are happy when others fail or suffer. Do you feel good when your adversaries suffer?
- ? Are your relationships suffering? Bitterness often leads to jealousy, covetousness, envy, hatred, gossip, and criticism. Bitter people don't make good friends. If anger is hindering your personal relationships, you may be guilty of bitterness.

Naomi admitted that she was bitter—in fact, bitter enough to rename herself Bitter. Maybe some of us are bitter. Maybe some of us are prone to bitterness or struggle with feelings of bitterness. Maybe you feel like you have the right to be bitter.

Let's consider *how to beat bitterness*. How can we experience the disasters and disappointments of life without becoming bitter?¹

I. Acknowledge your bitterness as sin against God and against others.

James 3:14–15 *if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.* ¹⁵ *This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.*

Bitterness is a sin, and if you have feelings of bitterness, confess it as sin and repent of it.

¹ Some of this based on a handout from Northland Camp.

A. You may have bitterness against God

1. Naomi's main complaint was against God; the hand of the Lord had gone out against her; God had afflicted her. She was bitter about what God had allowed in her life.
2. Many people are angry with God. God allowed some kind of disaster or disappointment, and they are angry that things happened in a certain way.
3. Bitterness against God is not unusual. If you read through the Psalms, you will find expressions of disappointment and even anger at what God has allowed. Cf. Job seems quite bitter at God.
4. But we don't really have the right to be bitter with God. We may be disappointed or we may question why God has allowed tragedy or disaster, but we should not allow ourselves to sink to the level of bitterness—anger, resentment—against God. We are supposed to trust God and love him.
5. So if you have feelings of bitterness against God, confess that as sin. Admit it to God and ask for forgiveness. Ask for help in dealing with feelings of bitterness against God.

B. Some people may have bitterness against other people.

1. Anger is not necessarily sinful. The Bible says that Jesus got angry on some occasions. The Bible frequently mentions the wrath of God.
2. But holding on to that anger is sinful. Refusing to forgive is sinful. If that anger leads to hatred and resentment, then it has become bitterness.
3. And if that bitterness is directed toward other people, then it is sinful. That's not the right attitude to have toward others. The Bible commands us to love our neighbor and even our enemies.

Trans: Whatever the source of your bitterness—whether you are bitter against God or against others—confess it as sin and repent of it (1 John 1:9). “Kill the root before it produces fruit.”

Acknowledge bitterness as sin, and then...

II. Obey the biblical commands to reject bitterness.

Ephesians 4:31 *Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.*

- A. Bitterness is sin. The Bible commands us to put it away, to get rid of it.
- B. We should not tolerate bitterness in our lives. If we have feelings of bitterness, our first concern should be to get rid of those feelings.

How do we do that?...

- III. Choose to forgive those who have wronged you, remembering that God has graciously forgiven you.

Colossians 3:13 *bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.*

- A. Bitterness often stems from others mistreating or abusing you. What someone else did to you was absolutely wrong and sinful, and you are angry about it. And you remain angry about it.
- B. Some people have absolutely legitimate reasons for being angry. If you have experienced abuse, it's totally understandable why you might be angry. People do terrible things to one another. Some of us, no doubt, have experienced tragic abuse and mistreatment. It's understandable why someone would be angry about that.
- C. But bitterness is not the proper response. Bitterness will only hurt you; it doesn't do you any good, and it doesn't hurt the one who hurt you. Continuing to be angry about mistreatment only harms yourself.
- D. Jesus tells us to forgive others like God has forgiven us. That forgiveness is not based on the person's worthiness of forgiveness. We base our forgiveness of others in God's gracious forgiveness of us.
- E. In fact, we can forgive others even if they don't apologize. We can simply release that hurt without the guilty person knowing anything about it.
- F. Although it may be very difficult to do, we must work toward forgiveness of those who have mistreated us. It's best to release that anger and not hold on to it.

Illus.: Movie made about a man who was severely tortured by the Japanese in WWII. After the war, the man got saved and he went to Japan to try to find the prison guards who so brutally mistreated him. He forgave them because God had forgiven him.

We can extend grace to others because God extends grace to us. God expects us to do that.

That obviously doesn't mean that we ignore legal issues. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that we drop the issue altogether. If laws were broken, then we have to get the legal system involved. We may need to call the police or child protective services if we are aware of abuse. But even in abusive situations, we can extend grace. We don't want to hold on to that anger, even if it is justified. Don't allow anger to become life-dominating.

- IV. Choose to believe that God is working all things together for his glory and for your good (Rom 8:28).
 - A. Part of walking by faith is believing that God is using trials and tragedies in our lives to conform us more closely to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). Tragedy and sorrow should drive us closer to God, not farther away from him.
 - B. I admit that in certain cases, it's very hard to see how God could use suffering, pain, and abuse for any kind of good purpose. In our broken, corrupt, and dark world, it's sometimes hard to see God's purposes being fulfilled in human suffering. E.g., tsunami, earthquake
 - C. But we don't know all the details of human life. We don't know how God's purposes may be involved in such experiences. Only in eternity will we come to understand why things happened the way they did.
 - D. We have God's promise that, for those who love God and who are called according to his purpose, all things work out for good. We may not see or understand that good until we get to heaven.
- V. Consider whether trials and disasters may be a form of chastisement or discipline.
 - A. If you are living in unrepentant disobedience, and you are a Christian, you should expect God to bring trials into your life.
 - B. People often get bitter over problems that are a direct result of their own sinful behavior and attitudes. They get angry when God disciplines them for their sin.
 - C. We should not be like little immature children who throw a temper tantrum when their parents discipline them. We should not get bitter when God allows us to reap what we've sown.
 - D. Perhaps your anger is misdirected. Instead of being angry at God or others, you should perhaps be most angry at yourself. You may be the cause of the problem.
- VI. Determine to deal with problems biblically.

Matthew 5:23–24 *Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

A. Deal with human problems biblically.

1. The Bible commands us to be reconciled to our brothers. Before we worship God, we should get things right with other people.
2. When someone else caused the problem that is leading to your own personal bitterness, you have a couple of options.
 - a) Forget it. You can just try to put it behind you and not bring it up again. Refuse to be offended; refuse to feel bitter.

Pr 10:12 *Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.*

Pr 17:9 *He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates friends.*

Love compels us to disregard some sins against us. We should ignore minor offenses and refuse to be offended. Don't make mountains out of mole hills. Try to think the best of others. Forget the minor offenses and insults that come against you. Let it go.

But if the offense is significant, then your other option is to

- b) Follow biblical guidelines in confronting the guilty person. What are the biblical guidelines for dealing with problems caused by others?
 - (1) You confront the person personally and privately. You tell the person that what he did was offensive and sinful. You give the person an opportunity to apologize.
 - (2) The goal is to restore the relationship. And I think most people, when confronted in the right way, will readily seek a solution to the conflict. They will apologize and try to make things right. At least Christians should do that.

- (3) Some people, no doubt, will refuse to be reconciled. They will not respond properly to your attempt to restore the relationship. But you should still try.
- (4) If you feel bitterness against another person, deal with it biblically.

B. Deal with natural problems/disasters biblically.

1. Often the disasters we deal with are *not* directly caused by other people. We have to endure natural disasters, sickness, and disappointment.
2. What do you do when a fire destroys your home? What do you do when a loved one dies of a horrible disease? What do you do when life doesn't turn out like you thought it would?
3. That's when you have to be like Job—"I came into the world with nothing and I'll go out of the world with nothing. The Lord gave and the Lord took away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."
4. When we suffer great loss like that, we simply have to trust in God. We must avoid being like Naomi who became bitter over God's work in her life.

VII. Control your thoughts.

- A. Don't allow yourself to dwell on or brood over the disasters and hurts you have experienced. If you want to be depressed, constantly think about all the hurts and disappointments you've experienced.
- B. Bitterness is a symptom of selfishness. We become bitter because we are too concerned about ourselves.
- C. If you are struggling with bitterness, it may be a symptom of an even deeper problem—self-centeredness. Bitterness can be a sign of an unbiblical preoccupation with yourself. If you are having feelings of bitterness, maybe you are self-centered.
- D. The Bible commands us to think on things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, good, virtuous, and worthy of praise (Phil 4:8). That means that we don't focus our attention on the tragedies that have happened to us or on the evil people who have done us wrong.

- E. What is the great commandment? Love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. What is the 2nd great commandment? Love your neighbor as yourself. If we focus on loving God and loving others, we won't have a lot of time to focus on ourselves. People who focus on helping others generally don't struggle with feelings of bitterness. Their focus is not themselves. They are selfless, not self-centered.

Trans: We must control our thoughts and attitudes. If you have constant feelings of bitterness, it may indicate that you are self-centered.

- VIII. Try to follow good examples such as Joseph (Gen 50:20) and Jesus (1 Peter 2:23) who were severely mistreated yet did not harbor bitterness.

- A. If anyone had a reason for being bitter, it was Joseph. He was totally innocent, yet he was mistreated, enslaved, and forgotten for many years. But Joseph saw how God had used his abusive experiences for his own good purposes. Even what others intended for evil, Joseph asserted God intended for good. He focused on the positive, not the negative.

- B. Jesus knew that all the abuse and persecution he would experience would be for the benefit of his people.

1Pe 2:23 when [Jesus] was reviled, [he] did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;

The proper response to abuse is to commit ourselves to God. He is the righteous judge. God will enact judgment and vengeance on all those who deserve it. We don't have to spend our time and energy plotting against or hating those who have done us wrong.

Bitter people often seek revenge on their enemies. Christians commit their abusers to God and let God take care of judgment and vengeance.

Rom 12:19 ...for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

That doesn't mean that we ignore legal considerations. If someone is guilty of illegal behavior, contact the authorities. You don't sweep illegal activity under the rug. But even if legal action is necessary, you can still forgive; you can prevent yourself from becoming bitter.

Naomi was bitter, and she probably thought she had good reason to be bitter. The hand of God had gone out against her. God had afflicted her. She'd gone out full and returned empty.

Many of us have good reasons to be bitter. But the Bible commands us to avoid bitterness. Put it away; get rid of it. Confess bitterness as a sin. Forgive those who have wronged you. Refuse to hold on to that hurt. It's not doing you any good. Don't brood over the wrongs that others have done to you.

Turn over all those hurts and all those bitter feelings to God. Let him deal with those who have abused or mistreated you.

And if you are bitter with God, confess that as sin and believe that God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing everything he does. Believe that he is working all things for his glory and for the good of those who love him.