

## Bitterness

Leonard Holt was a paragon of respectability. He was a middle-aged, hard-working lab technician who had worked at the same Pennsylvania paper mill for nineteen years. Having been a Boy Scout leader, an affectionate father, a member of the local fire brigade, and a regular church attender, he was admired as a model citizen in his community—until that image exploded in a well-planned hour of bloodshed one brisk October morning.

On that fateful day, Leonard Holt stuffed two pistols in his coat pockets and drove to the paper mill. He stalked slowly into his shop and began shooting with calculated frenzy. He hit several co-workers with two or three bullets apiece, firing more than thirty shots, killing some men he had known for more than fifteen years.

Puzzled policemen and friends finally found a train of logic behind his brief reign of terror. Down deep within the heart of Leonard Holt seethed with a profound sense of bitterness. His conventional exterior concealed the boiling hatred within. The investigation revealed that several victims had been promoted over him while he remained in the same position. The man was brimming with resentment—rage that eventually spilled over into murderous violence. Time Magazine ran a story about Leonard Holt titled: “Responsible, Respectable, and Resentful.”<sup>1</sup>

Very few people go on murderous rampages like Leonard Holt did, but many have feelings of bitterness and resentment similar to his.

A handful of NT verses mention bitterness:

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

Col 3:19 *Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.*

Hebrews 12:15 *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;*

The Bible contains several examples of bitterness: Cain against Able, Naomi (Mara) against God, Absalom against David

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching: Over 1500 Sermon Illustrations Arranged by Topic and Indexed Exhaustively*, Revised edition of: The expositor's illustration file. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989). Edited.

Bitterness is one of those sins of the spirit that may be happening internally that no one else knows about. If we have a “root of bitterness” in our lives, we must make every effort to dig it up and get rid of it before it damages ourselves and others.

## I. Definition of bitterness

- A. Bitterness is characterized by strong feelings of hatred, resentment, and distrust; we might define it as “hurt that one holds.”
- B. Bitterness is a kind of anger. Bitter people are angry about something. Bitter people have had some kind of negative experience, and they hold on to a feeling of anger or hatred because of it. That feeling of anger becomes a major influence in their life.

## II. Drives of bitterness

What causes or motivates bitterness?

- A. Probably the main cause of bitterness is a sinful response to mistreatment or adversity.
  - 1. Someone mistreats you, sins against you, abuses you, or irritates you, and you respond with anger and resentment. The sense of having been wronged or neglected becomes life-dominating for the bitter person.
  - 2. Or you experience terrible accidents, physical pain, or bad health. It’s not a person who is treating you badly; it’s life or circumstances or God.  
  
E.g., Job—a whole book of the Bible regarding a man’s responses to terrible circumstances that God allowed.
  - 3. Bitterness arises within us when we respond to these negative experiences with anger and resentment.
- B. Another possible cause of bitterness is jealousy. You feel envious against others who enjoy greater privileges or status than you do. Others have better things or a better life than you do; others succeed or are promoted instead of you, and you feel bitter against them.
- C. Or if it’s the circumstances of life or even God who allows you to experience terrible tragedies, bitterness comes from a failure to understand human life or to understand God.
- D. Bitterness might come from unfulfilled expectations. We think that life should be a certain way, and if it’s not that way, we might become bitter. When those expectations don’t happen, people become bitter.

- E. Bitterness comes from a refusal to forgive or to handle pain biblically. When you hold on to hurt caused by other people, you are really failing to forgive.
- F. Ultimately, bitterness is driven by self-centeredness or pride. The injured person focuses on himself and his hurt, his injury, the unfairness that he experienced, his lack of success, his loss. Because of that self-centered focus, he refuses to forgive the cause of the injury. Bitterness comes from an unforgiving sense of self-centeredness.

Think of how self-centered a person would have to be to murder his co-workers because they were promoted and he was overlooked!!

**Trans:** Several sources might be driving feelings of bitterness. If you have bitterness in your heart, consider what the source might be.

### III. Diagnosis of bitterness

How do you know if you are bitter? Bitterness usually reveals itself, although it may take time, and the demonstration may be somewhat removed from the original cause. Ask yourself these questions:

- ? Do you keep a list of the wrongs people do to you? Bitter people constantly rehearse the terrible things others have done to them.
- ? Do minor issues or problems cause heated responses? Do you get angry over insignificant issues? That could reveal bitterness just under the surface.
- ? Are your relationships suffering? Bitterness often leads to jealousy, covetousness, envy, hatred, gossip, and criticism. Bitter people don't make good friends, spouses or parents. If anger is hindering your personal relationships, you may be guilty of bitterness.
- ? Do you have any concern for solving the problem, or do you enjoy being angry? Does constant anger feel normal? Does it feel good when you lose your temper?
- ? Are you glad when others suffer? There's a German word, *Schadenfreude* (shoden-froida), that means, "joy over harm or misfortune suffered by another." Bitter people are happy when those who hurt them fail or suffer.

**Trans:** If these things are true of you, you are probably experiencing bitterness.

### IV. Damage of bitterness—what's the problem with being bitter?

- A. Hebrews 12:15 “...thereby many be defiled” – the word means, “to dye with another color, to stain; hence to pollute, sully, contaminate.” Bitterness defiles or contaminates everything it touches. Bitterness can be like a contagious disease that spreads and makes others sick.
- B. Bitterness affects us and others in various ways.
  - 1. Personally – bitterness negatively affects the individual who is bitter. Bitterness stirs up further sinful behaviors like jealousy, covetousness, envy, hatred, and violence. Feelings of resentment can have effects on your health—heart disease, high blood pressure can stem from bitterness.
  - 2. Family – bitterness may cause family members to stop communicating with each other. In some families, bitterness leads to abuse and violence.
  - 3. Church – bitterness within a congregation can destroy unity and even cause church splits.

**Trans:** Bitterness causes a lot of damage; many are “defiled” by it. You might think that it’s merely an internal, personal, private problem. But if you tolerate it, bitterness might have much further damaging consequences. Bitterness is a root that brings forth ugly fruit.

#### v. Defeating Bitterness

Determine to root out bitterness in your life. How?

- A. Confess your bitterness as sin against God and against others.

James 3:14–15 *But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic.*

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

- 1. You may have bitterness against God
  - a) Many people are angry with God. God allowed some kind of disaster or disappointment, and they are angry that God allowed or caused them pain. E.g., Naomi/Mara.
  - b) 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.

- c) But we don't 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. That kind of anger implies that God is not good or that he doesn't care about us.

We are supposed to trust God and love him. Walking by faith is believing Rom 8:28. E.g., the story of Ruth and Naomi.

- d) 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.

2. Some people may have bitterness against other people.

- a) Anger is not necessarily sinful. The Bible says that Jesus got angry on some occasions. The Bible frequently mentions the wrath of God against sinners and their sin. Righteous indignation is not sinful.
- b) But holding on to anger or hatred is sinful. Refusing to forgive is sinful. If that anger leads to hatred and resentment, then it has become bitterness.
- c) 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. The Bible commands us to forgive.

**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.”

Confess bitterness as sin, and then...

B. 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.*

If we have feelings of bitterness, our first concern should be to get rid of those feelings. How do we do that?...

1. 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 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. Continuing to be hateful 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 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.:** I heard 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.

2. 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. It's unbiblical to expect that God will shield us from tragedy, sorrow, and pain. Life can be very tragic and painful; it is for many people. We live in a cursed and broken world that is only getting worse all the time.
  - c. It's hard to see how God could use suffering, pain, and abuse for any kind of good purpose. In our broken, corrupt, and cursed world, it's sometimes hard to see God's purposes being fulfilled in human suffering. E.g., tsunami, earthquake, pandemics, abuse of children.
  - d. We don't know how God's purposes may be involved in such experiences. We believe that God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing what he allows. Only in eternity will we come to understand why things happened the way they did.
  - e. 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.

The most common expression in heaven—"Ohhhh..."

3. Consider whether trials and disasters may be a form of chastisement or discipline.
  - a. If a Christian is living in unrepentant disobedience, he should expect God to bring trials into his 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 or when they reap what they've sown.

- 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. Don't get bitter over your own bad decisions.

4. Determine to deal with problems biblically.

One of the sources of bitterness is failure to deal with interpersonal problems properly.

*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) Forgive and forget. 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. 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. If it's a clear-cut, biblical offense, then you confront the guilty person about it.

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.

We must trust that God will deal with the situation.

Rom 12:19 *Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*

If you feel bitterness against another person, deal with it biblically.

- b. Deal with natural adversity/disasters biblically.
1. Often the disasters we experience are *not* directly caused by other people. We have to endure natural disasters, sickness, and tragedy.

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 you experience natural disasters or catastrophes?
  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.
5. Control your thoughts.
- a. Don't allow yourself to brood over the disasters and hurts you have experienced. Continual meditation/rumination on all the hurts and disappointments you've experienced will likely result in bitterness, resentment, and depression. Instead, try to move beyond those tragedies. Look to the future, not the past. Let bygones be bygones.
  - b. Bitterness is a symptom of selfishness. We become bitter because we are too concerned about ourselves.
  - c. 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 and unforgiving. Work on becoming less self-centered.
6. Try to follow good examples such as Joseph and Jesus 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 neglected 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 believed that God intended for good (Gen 50:20). He focused on the positive, not the negative. He saw God's purposes behind his pain.

- b. Likewise, 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;*

That's the key to unlocking and destroying bitterness—we commit ourselves to God and let him sort things out. If you are struggling with feelings of bitterness, work at entrusting yourself to God. Believe that God will deal with those who caused your pain. Trust God to give you the grace to forgive others as God forgave you.

Leonard Holt had good reasons, at least in his own mind, for being bitter. His bitterness erupted into murderous violence, and people died because of it.

Some of us, no doubt, have good reasons to be bitter. We've experienced pain, hurt, abuse, and betrayal. Perhaps we have feelings of hatred and resentment against other people, against our circumstances in life, and maybe even against God.

But the Bible commands us to avoid bitterness. We must put it away; get rid of it; kill it. Confess bitterness as 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 or the pains that you have suffered. Don't dwell on your disappointments. Look to the future, not the past.

Turn over all those hurts and all those bitter feelings to God. Entrust yourself to him. Let him deal with those who have abused or mistreated you. Strive to forgive others as God has forgiven 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.