

Bitterness: Defining-Recognizing- Fighting

What is bitterness?

“One Biblical word for bitterness literally describes the bitter taste of certain foods and drinks. The verb translated ‘to be bitter’ means ‘to cut’ or ‘to prick’” -Bitterness (p6)

“You may think of bitterness as an internal, self inflicting wound, and so it is. But the Bible says that this resentful, unforgiving attitude will cut and prick others as well.” (Priolo)

Bitterness is sin. Ephesians 4:31 (remember these are instructions for Christians on ‘The New Life’) - **Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.**

Dr. Greg Gifford describes bitterness as “*animosity, anger, harshness, or resentment*”

We have all experienced bitterness. We [or others] may not use the word bitter, and may mask our attitude with phrases like: “I’m just disappointed in them for _____”

I am disappointed in what they said, or didn’t say. What they did or didn’t do, or how they treated me (or someone else)

Gifford says that typically people who are bitter struggle with ‘worshipping control and/or justice’

Expectations and standards for others or for truth or what is right become functional gods. No one is able to satisfy the demands of a bitter heart that often go way beyond what God expects or says.

The question we should ask ourselves 'Am I resentful?, am I embittered towards them/this?'

The Bible talks about bitterness as being able to take root and cause trouble (and we are to keep from letting that happen) **Hebrews 12:15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.**

Priolo adds: "Roots have to be planted. Generally speaking that seed, when planted in our hearts is a hurt. When someone hurts you they drop a seed of bitterness into the soil of your heart. You can then do two things: pluck up the seed by forgiving the offender, or, cultivate the seed by reviewing hurt over and over in your mind."

A couple of simple definitions helped me to think about bitterness: "resentment is keeping track of wrong doing...bitterness is keeping record of wrong doing"

As God's word teaches us: Biblical love does not keep track (see 1 Corinthians 13)

Bitterness is not helpful to us, and the implication is that bitterness is like a cancer that affects us and others. Bitterness doesn't honour the Lord and has no place in the Christian life.

How can we recognize if we are bitter?

The following examples are taken from 'Evidences of Bitterness'
-Bitterness-THE ROOT THAT POLLUTES- Lou Priolo

How many of these might you be able to identify with (as hard as it is, begin by thinking about people close to you)

1. Difficulty in resolving conflicts. Trying to resolve conflicts you are unwilling to forgive is like trying to build a skyscraper without first laying a foundation. Bitterness will doom the project.

2. Acts of Vengeance. A back biting comment, or spiteful remark to an offender's face, or physical altercation, taking one's own vengeance is a sure sign of unforgiveness.

3. Withdrawal. When we give our offenders the silent treatment or cold shoulder we are likewise being vindictive. We are essentially saying "Look I've tried to tell you over and over again how much it bugs me when you do (or don't) do that. But you just don't get it. So, the only thing I know to do to show you how much you've hurt me is to give you a taste of your own medicine. When I think you have an inkling of how much you've hurt me-perhaps I'll start talking to you again.

4. Outbursts of Anger. When we are bitter, we don't see each new offence on a clean slate that is relatively easy to forgive, but rather as one more item on a long growing list of offences under a common heading ("Hurtful Things She Has Said to Me Over the Years")

5. Biting sarcasm. Snide remarks, mean-spirited joking, caustic comments, scornful replies, and other such forms of sarcasm are generated in a resentful heart.

6. Condescending communication and Criticism.

7. Suspicion and distrust. When bitterness causes a breakdown in communication (as it commonly does) the parties become suspicious of each other. Small 'offenses' that typically would be dismissed with "They didn't mean anything by it, I've done it a hundred times" are then interpreted with less charitable motives

8. Intolerance. Similarly, bitterness disposes us to not put up (forbear-Ephesians 4:2) with our offender's non sinful behaviour. Resentment makes mountains out of molehills.

9. Hypersensitivity. Treating a pinprick as though it were a knife through one's heart may likewise be indicative of an unforgiving spirit.

Pride tends to fit this mould “ You haven’t offended ANY ole’ person, you’ve offended ME and my anger is not so easily propitiated.

Dr. Gifford explains that when we are bitter we become ‘puffy’ Everything people do bothers us. “ I don’t like how you breathe, or blink your eyes” Which doesn’t have to do with that at all, but the root of bitterness that is growing in our heart and attitude.

10. Rebellion against authority, Disrespect. Rebellion hardly ever occurs apart from bitterness. It begins with a seed of hurt, then sprouts into bitterness, matures into stubbornness, and then develops

11. Misuse of authority. When bitterness toward a subordinate is in the heart of an authority, it can produce a domineering, dictatorial, or tyrannical attitude that demands needless exactions of obedience.

“The cure for bitterness is not found in getting even, but by giving grace.” (I apologize I can’t remember where I read this)

How can we fight bitterness?

“When you have a heart that is embittered part of the answer is to grow in love so that you notice less...less bothers you” -Gifford

Dr. Grant Horner has said [paraphrase] that he wanted to be a man that was un-offendable. He wouldn’t be bitter because he wasn’t tempted to be bitter. He wanted to grow in love (with Jesus Christ and others) and as a result be less inclined to be bitter.

One great exercise is to go through 1 Corinthians 13. A Pastor once told me about how he inserts his name into the text when he is reading it (He is not saying He is Jesus, but it helps him identify and examine his heart)

ie) 1 Corinthians 4-7 [Cliff] Love is patient and kind: [Cliff] love does not envy or boast; it [Cliff] is not arrogant or rude. It [Cliff] does not insist on its own way; it [Cliff] is not irritable or resentful, it [Cliff] does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love [Cliff] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

This can be a wonderful ‘time with the Lord’ as you meditate on His word, confess your sins, and let the Spirit minister it to your heart as Christ is revealed and your faith and love for Him [and others] and His way, grows. Dr. Gifford has a 3 strategy plan that he uses in Biblical Counselling sessions to fight bitterness:

1. **Understand the True Nature of Love** (1 Corinthians-Bible) Genuinely be committed to love and growing in love for PEOPLE. Biblical practice of love. *embittered people are the least loving* Lord, cultivate a ‘heart of love in me’
2. **Meditate on God’s forgiveness.** Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Meditating on Christ and the Gospel and God’s forgiveness begins to ‘thaw our iceberg of bitterness’ and helps us to see ‘this is petty, or helps us be open to reconciling’ What is your new identity? Renew the mind with Gospel truths.

“Preach the Gospel to yourself every day” Pastor Ryan

3. **Understand what God calls us to do.** John 21 - Jesus tells Peter a couple times to “Follow Me” We have a responsibility before God to follow Him. This is our responsibility and at the end of the day we don’t have this responsibility for others. It is theirs. What is God calling me to do towards this person? We sometimes get wrapped up in what they have done and our justice meters begin to spike. You don’t have to control what that person is doing-only how you respond.

Overcoming Evil with Good. The Key to Transforming Your Feelings.

Romans 12: 17-21

17) Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing so you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The thought in the second half of this verse is "to think of beforehand" We would do well to think ahead as to what our response to evil will be.

"Soldiers are drilled before the battle so that in the heat of combat, they will respond automatically in the right way." -Priolo

In this light, how can you prepare your 'kindness' arsenal? Maybe take some time to write ways you can overcome evil with good.

18) If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all

If possible we are to live peaceably with ALL (believers and unbelievers) and as Christians we know that believers are expected to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" -Ephesians 4:3

The second clause of the verse is unconditional "so far as it depends on YOU, be at peace with all men." We must be peace makers-not peace fakers. We are called to pursue peace and make every effort (Hebrews 12:14)

"Love for neighbour is not predicated on his love for you. We should be willing (initiating and pursuing)" -Priolo

Consider that we are responsible to God- are we sure we haven't provoked to anger? Aggravated someone to sin as a response to our sin?

Also consider leaving a matter that you can't overlook way too long which can lead to bitterness and suspicion festering and taking deep root.

19) ***Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord."***

The Bible instructs us never to take personal vengeance. God has not given any one person that authority. See Romans 13 for God ordained authorities that execute vengeance. God will deal with things indirectly or directly in His timing (which is the best timing) We also don't have the ability to do so because we do not know all things, matters of the heart, or true motives.

...for the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. 1 Samuel 16:7

"If God were to say this is my crown, would you walk up and take it off his head? Taking vengeance is stealing from God." - Priolo

20) ***To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing so you will heap burning coals on his head."***

This is a clear instruction to love our enemies by meeting their needs according to God's grace. "Overcoming evil with good is the BEST way to overcome residual feelings of bitterness you may still have after you have forgiven in your heart." -Priolo (this may be awkward at first, but keep pressing forward and it will become more natural)

The coals spoken of are good deeds heaped on the enemy.

"Remember, Paul has warfare in his mind. In his day, they didn't have flame throwers, but they knew that fire was an effective weapon. If you could get coals (of smokeless undetectable charcoal, as the word here indicates) on your enemy's head, you would effectively put him out of business as an enemy. You would subdue and overcome him. Picture your troops holding your heights above the pass. Secretly, you have heated large beds of charcoal to white heat. As the unsuspecting enemy passes directly beneath, you shovel them on his head. You have him! You've

defeated him! He is rendered powerless, helpless! You've stopped him in his tracks. That is the picture." Jay E. Adams

21) ***Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.***

In the first injunction the command is to NOT be overcome. We are not to lose, give up, throw in the towel, whine, or allow sin to conquer or lead us.

consider the enemy of our souls (David Psalm 143) but also evil people doing evil things.

By the strength and grace that Christ provides we are fighting to win. Means of accomplishing this are important to God. We are to bless those who persecute us, bless and do not curse. Romans 12:14 The thought here is we are to persecute all with blessing!

In the second injunction we are told to overcome (conquer) "You must not cease from pursuing your opponent with good until you win the war"- Priolo

We often find ourselves becoming faint in spirit and saying "I can't take this much longer...how long is this going to last? But a more helpful battle plan is to pray and consider how can I use what God has given me to fight this foe?

1 Thessalonians 5:15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

If we want to put rubber to the road, it might help to make a personal list with some ideas on how we can overcome evil with good. How will you do this by responding in love when you are sinned against in the future?

Gospel Transformation Study Bible ESV, Transformed with Dr. Greg Gifford 3 part series on Bitterness, Resources for Biblical Living-Bitterness-The Root that Pollutes - Lou Priolo

