

How to be Free From Bitterness

by Jim Wilson

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 4:31-5:2).

In our text we are instructed to get rid of all bitterness. Before we begin discussing how and why this must be done, it is crucial to realize that the basis for all our actions in this regard must be what Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross. In all our actions, we are to be imitators of God.

In the Old Testament, there was a woman whose name meant Pleasant. Her name was Naomi and she had moved from Israel to another land with her husband and sons. But her husband had died and within the next ten years both of her sons died. She made some comments to her recently widowed daughters-in-law about it.

Ruth 1:13b: “... it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!” She was comparing in order to determine who had the right to be more bitter.

And in Ruth 1:20-21: “So she said to them, ‘Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?’”

Her bitterness was toward God. It was God who had taken away her husband; it was God who had taken away her sons, and she held it against Him. Five times in these three verses she held God accountable for her bitterness.

There are many people like this today. Not only are they bitter, they enjoy being bitter. They somehow like it, and they feed on it. They wouldn’t know what to do if they got rid of it; they wouldn’t have a purpose for living. They like being bitter.

We know people like that in the world, and we know people like that in the church. It is easy to recognize when somebody is bitter. You can see it in the eyes and in the lines of the face — even if the person is young. You can see it in their mouth, you can see it when they’re smiling or laughing. They are bitter and you can see it. You can hear it in the tone of their voices. You can hear it when they protest that they are not bitter. The bitterness is central and pervades everything.

There are bitter people in the Bible besides Naomi. In fact, there are quite a few. For example, Jonah was a bitter man. The Lord said to him, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”

“I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die” (Jon. 4:9).

He thought he had a right to his anger. *I like being angry. God, you are wrong to forgive people. I don’t want you to forgive people.*

People enjoy holding things against other people. But our text requires us to remove all bitterness and to maintain a tender heart. Here’s the question: Is it possible to be kind, compassionate, tenderhearted and yet bitter at the same time? These are all interior attitudes. Tenderheartedness, by definition, involves a tender heart. Bitterness is also on the inside. But it is not possible to have two different, contradictory attitudes on the inside.

Paul says to get rid of all bitterness and to be kind and compassionate one to another. Therefore, the bitterness must go. But before it can be removed, it is necessary to know what it is — and that it is there.

It is relatively easy to see when other people are bitter. But it’s not so easy to see it in ourselves. It is therefore important to have a good understanding of the Bible’s definition of the problem.

Let us suppose that a Christian commits a sin. He tells a lie, for instance. Now when he tells this lie, does he feel guilty or does he feel bitter? The answer is guilty. When we sin, we feel guilty. It is straightforward. Now let us suppose that someone told a lie about this same Christian and spread it all over town. What does he feel now — guilt or bitterness?

Guilt is what we feel when we sin, and *bitterness is what we feel when others sin against us*. The very definition of bitterness points to the action of another. If we had committed the offense, we would feel guilty and would know that we had to confess and forsake our sin.

We might not confess the sin, but not because we did not know what to do. But what do we do with the guilt of others? Bitterness is always based upon someone else's sin—whether real or imagined.

Consider the imaginary sin first. Many times we can be bitter toward someone for what he said, when in reality he did not say it. We heard a false report, and now we are bitter. We wait for an apology which he cannot offer. Shall we remain in bitterness the rest of our lives because he never says he is sorry for something he did not do?

Incidentally, many bitter people cannot imagine the possibility that they are bitter over imaginary sins. As far as bitterness is concerned, the other person's guilt is always real. For such a person trying to be free from bitterness, it is acceptable for them to assume the real guilt of the other person, *so long as they get rid of their own bitterness*.

But what about genuine sin? There are many bitter people who really were mistreated by the offender. So how do we deal with a genuine offense?

Bitterness is based on sin that somehow relates to you. It is not concerned with how big the sin is; it is based upon how close it is. For instance, if some great and gross immorality occurs in Iran, Iraq, El Salvador, or Columbia, what do we do? We read about it, but we will not feel guilty. We read about it, but we will not feel bitter. We might be appalled or amazed, but we do not feel guilty, and we do not feel bitter. Nevertheless, it was an awful sin, and someone actually committed it. So it does not depend on how great the evil is, *it depends on how close the other person is to me*. Bitterness is related to those people who are close.

Who are likely candidates? The answer is simple: fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, children, boyfriends, girlfriends, roommates, immediate superiors, immediate subordinates, co-workers, business partners, and maybe some other relatives — grandparents, uncles, and others. There are even many people who are bitter against God.

We do not get bitter towards evil outside of our own immediate contact. Bitterness is based upon somebody else's sin who is close to us, and who did something to us. It might be minor. It does not have to be great, *it just has to be close*. Does he pick up his socks? No? Can you get bitter over that? Well, no, but what if he does it 5,000 times?

You may think you have a right to be bitter. But the Bible does not grant anyone the right to be bitter. The text says *to get rid of all bitterness*.

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Heb. 12:15).

Here it describes bitterness as if it were a root. A root is something that is underground and cannot be seen. But there can be visible evidence of its presence, as when sidewalks are lifted.

Roots do other things. The fact that you cannot see roots does not mean they are not there. Neither does it mean you will never see them. They drink in nourishment, and they do not stay roots. Eventually they come up.

The fruit that is born bears a direct relation to the root producing it. The roots of an apple tree provide us with apples. If there is a bitter root, it will bear bitter fruit.

That is what this verse is saying. Beware lest any root of bitterness spring up, cause trouble, and defile many people, which means to make many people filthy. Have you ever seen bitterness go through a church? Bitterness can go through a congregation like a prairie fire. It can go through the work place or a dormitory. Why is this? Somebody decided to share. He was bitter, let the root come to the surface and bear fruit. He shared it and many people became bitter. The author of Hebrews warns us about this. He says beware of missing the grace of God. When you allow it, bitterness comes up and defiles many people. It makes many people filthy.

What happens to a person if he keeps bitterness on the inside for many years? What happens to him physically? Can he get physically sick? Suppose it is bitterness toward some member of the family. He's kept it inside, he has not shared it. He has not defiled many people — he has kept it down inside. When he keeps it inside for some years, he finally begins to hurt. He goes to the doctor and the doctor says, "You are right, you are sick. But your sickness is not the kind I deal with. I am going to send you to the other kind of doctor."

So he sends him to the psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist agrees. "Yes, you are sick all right. And I know why you are sick. You are sick because of 20 years of bitterness towards your father. You have kept it suppressed all these years and it's just rotted out your insides. You have kept this poison within and this acid on the inside has

made you just physically ill. So what I want you to do is I want you to go home and share it with your father. Why keep it in and get sick? Let it out. Get everybody else sick.”

So the world has two solutions. Keep the bitterness in, and make yourself sick, or let it out and spread the sickness around. God’s solution is to dig up the root. Get rid of it. *But this takes the grace of God.* A man must know the Lord Jesus Christ to be able to do this. He is the source of grace.

The world’s solutions for bitterness shouldn’t be used by Christians. When Christians copy the world, they have two poor choices. The Bible says to get rid of all bitterness. You must not keep it in and you must not share it. Surrender it to the Father, through the Son.

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (James 3:14,15).

When I was a young midshipman at the Naval Academy, I thought that the pettiness and jealousy I observed would give way to maturity. I thought the higher you got in rank, the more mature you became, the less this sort of thing occurred. But as I grew older I found out that the jealousy just got more intense. *Bitterness accumulates.* Unless there’s a solution to it, people do not get less bitter with maturity. They get more bitter over the years. It gets worse and worse.

And if you harbor bitter envy, evil practice will result. It does not come from heaven. It is straight from the pit and is of the devil. Every evil practice results from this attitude. As should be obvious, we have a real problem. How do we get rid of bitterness?

Before we can get rid of bitterness, we have to realize that we are bitter. How can we tell if we are bitter?

One good rule of thumb is this: *Bitterness remembers details.* You have had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you have forgotten. But this one took place five years ago, and you remember every single word, his intonation and the inflection of every part of his voice. You know exactly what happened — which means you are bitter.

Someone might object and say that it is also possible to have a good memory of a wonderful conversation. Is this possible? Yes, but not likely. Why is this? Because memory is helped by *review, review, and more review.* People do not usually mull over the wonderful things as much. But they do go over and over and over the bad things. I have done quite a bit of counseling with people who are in the process of getting divorced. I have known some since the time they were married, at a happier time in their life. But at the time of the divorce they cannot remember a single happy time. All they can remember is that which they have gone over and over. They are bitter.

This doesn’t mean there were not happy times. It just means that they have concentrated on how right they were and how wrong the other person was. If someone has a sharp, detailed memory for things which happened years ago when he was a child, or a young man or woman, and that memory is at all accusative of anyone else, then it is an indication of bitterness. And the solution for bitterness is to get rid of it.

I had a wonderful experience one time in Dallas, Texas. I was speaking on a Saturday night at the home of an old friend. Because I was going to be in Dallas, I wrote notes to several people that I’d known from different parts of the country at other times, and they showed up at this home.

My host asked me to speak on bitterness, which I did. Afterwards, a couple came up to see me. I had known them eight years before in Pullman, Washington. The wife came up to me and said, “We have been married for eight years. The first year of marriage I was so bitter toward my mother that I laid it on my husband every single day. Our first year of marriage was just awful because I kept sharing this bitterness toward my mother with my husband.”

She then told me that seven years ago I had spoken on bitterness and she had gotten rid of hers. One day she saw another woman who was really bitter towards her mother. She thought, “I can help that woman. I can share all the common experiences. I went to her to share this, and I couldn’t remember any of the details. My detailed memory had gone. All I could tell her was I used to remember things, and I do not remember them anymore.” The Lord had really taken care of her bitterness.

Another time I was teaching a four-week course on marriage. I had put a notice in the paper and did not know who would show up. A woman came who had been referred to the class by a doctor. She came in and I can honestly say that I have never seen anybody more bitter in appearance in my life. She had forty years of

accumulated bitterness. She got rid of it that night and made an appointment to see me the next day at the bookstore where I worked. She came in the store, and I did not know who she was. *She looked so different.* I had just met her the night before, but she was clean inside now.

What is the problem? Why is it we do not get rid of bitterness? If I tell a lie, I can confess it and be forgiven. In order to get rid of it I have to bring it back to my own heart. We need to bring the realization of bitterness back to our own hearts. Instead, the temptation is to look at the offender. Look what he did. That is the nature of bitterness. In order to get rid of it, I need to recognize it is **my** problem before I can confess and forsake it.

But you say, "I am not bitter. I just get hurt easily." But the symptoms of getting hurt are very close to the symptoms of resentment. Do you know what instant resentment is? You might say. "It is not bitterness — it is just hurt feelings." But there is a close relationship between being hurt and being resentful. Someone gets hurt and he gets resentful. There is another very close connection between resentment and bitterness. Resentment turns into a deep bitterness.

Bitterness is just resentment that has been held on to. It has become rancid and rotten. It is kept in and it gets worse. The links in the chain continue. There is a connection between bitterness and hatred, and a very clear biblical identification between hatred and murder. What I am saying is that hurt can lead to murder. Some might object that this teaching is too strong. But the strength of it is from the Bible.

What we want to do is make it apparent *how sinful bitterness is*. The bitter person must first recognize that he is bitter, and secondly, that it is a gross evil. Again, the reason people do not deal with this sin is that they think it is the other person's sin. The devil says, "Well, when he quits lying, or he quits doing this or that, or when he says he's sorry, then you will feel better."

But suppose he does not quit? Suppose he never quits? Are you going to be bitter the rest of your life because someone else insists on being in sin? That does not make any sense at all. You may say, "I will forgive him when he says he is sorry, but not until then. I have a right to my bitterness until then. When he says he is sorry, I will forgive him and everything will be fine." You keep this wall of bitterness up, and one day he comes to you and he says, "I'm sorry." Can you now forgive him? No, because bitterness doesn't forgive. In order to forgive this person when he says he is sorry you have to be ready before he says he is sorry. And if you are ready to forgive him before he says he is sorry, then it doesn't depend on whether he says he is sorry or not. In other words, you get rid of bitterness unilaterally. It does not matter what the other person does.

Earlier the point was made that bitterness seems to stem from the other person's sin — real or imagined. That is only how it appears. In reality bitterness is a sin that stands alone. The bitter person decides to be bitter independently of the offender.

But you say, "No, he sinned against me, and when he says he is sorry everything will be fine." But this is not true.

I've known situations where an apology was offered and the person is still bitter. Suppose the offender is dead and cannot apologize. I know people who are extremely bitter and the bitterness is toward their parents who died years ago. But the bitterness has not died. Bitterness is the sin of the bitter person alone, unrelated to anybody else.

One time I went to the Walla Walla State Penitentiary to spend the day with the inmates. It was around Christmas. I spent about six hours there. During the afternoon, I was in maximum security, talking about and teaching evangelism.

This one fellow asked about reaching the really hard-core criminals. I thought he was really interested in such evangelism and talked to him about it. Then I spent time in minimum security, protective custody and other places. In the evening I was back in maximum security, and thought I'd talk on this subject of bitterness. I figured there were probably some bitter people there.

This same fellow who asked about evangelism in the afternoon asked me another question. He said, "How can you get rid of bitterness towards somebody who beat up your three-year-old son unmercifully?" So I told him how, and then I said, "You know, when you get rid of your bitterness you can help this person so that he won't beat up other little kids."

He said, "No, this guy cannot be helped."

I said, "Sure, he can."

"No, no."

"Why not?"

"He is not with us any more."

This inmate had murdered him. He had murdered him because of what he had done to his three-year-old son—that's why he was in prison. But even though he had killed the man, *he was still bitter*. In other words, expressing it did not get rid of it.

When somebody else says he is sorry, it does not get rid of our bitterness. The only thing that gets rid of it is confession before God because of the Lord Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. *This is the only solution*.

We must not keep it and we must not share it with others. There is only one thing to do and that is to confess it as a great and evil sin. We must be as persistent in the confession as necessary.

Once I was speaking at Monterey, California, at the U.S. Naval Post-Graduate School. There was a man there who had a great reputation as a Bible teacher. He was a line officer in the Navy, but he had been passed over for the command of a submarine. He did not have command of a submarine and he was bitter. I spoke on confession of sin and bitterness, and he was really wiped out. He came and saw me and got rid of this bitterness. The next morning, his wife said to me, "I've got a new husband." He had been bitter toward the Navy. But it was his sin, not the Navy's.

Amy Carmichael has a note in her little book *If*. "For a cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, however suddenly jolted." If it is full of sweet water and is jolted, what will come out of the cup? Sweet water. If you gave it a harder jolt, what's going to happen? More sweet water. If someone is filled with sweet water and someone else gives him a jolt, what will come out? Sweet water. Jolts do not turn sweet water into bitter water. That is done by something else.

Jolts only bring out of the container what's already in the container. If you're filled with sweetness and light, and you get jolted, you're going to spill sweetness and light. If you're filled with honey, the honey will come out. If vinegar comes out, what does that prove? It shows what was already in the container. In other words, much bitterness is not based upon what the other person did at all. It is the result of what we do and are.

Many years ago, I was working in our bedroom at my desk. My wife, Bessie, was reading in bed. Whatever I was doing wasn't going well. Bessie said something to me and I turned around and let her have it. It was something unChristian. She looked at me in amazement and got up and left the room. I sat there thinking, "She should not have said it. Look what she said. Look, look, look." I did that for around 10 minutes, maybe longer. I was bitter toward Bessie, but all she did was jolt the cup. What was in the cup came out of the cup.

If I had been filled with sweetness and light, it would not have made any difference. I sat there and thought about what she did. I knew better, because I had already learned this truth about bitterness. Still, I thought about her "sin" because there is enjoyment in accusing the other person. Some people do this for years.

I sat there for a while and then got up and went over to my side of the bed, got on my knees and said, "Lord, I was the only one at fault. It was my bitterness and my sin. I am confessing it, forsaking it, and please forgive me."

I got up off my knees and said, "But look what she said." I got back on my knees.

"God, I'm sorry for what I did. I accept the responsibility. It was my sin and mine only."

I got up off my knees and said, "God, you and I know who is really at fault." I knelt back down. I stayed on my knees for 45 minutes until I could get up and not say, "Look what she said."

I do not remember now what she said, and I do not remember what I was doing at the desk. I do not remember the details. The only thing I remember now is getting up. But I also know that if I had not taken care of the bitterness *I would know to this day exactly what she had said*. That is the nature of bitterness.

In order to get rid of it, I have to see that it is evil and that it is my sin and my sin only. I do not get rid of it through the other person saying he is sorry. I do not get rid of it if the other person quits or dies. I do not get rid of it any other way except calling it sin against the holy God, confessing it and receiving forgiveness.

The difficulty is in getting my eyes off the other person's sin. But just the fact that I think it is his problem shows that it is not. If it were his problem, and I was filled with sweetness and light, and not bitter, then I would be concerned about the other person.

I could say, "That poor guy! Look what he did. If I did something like that, I would feel awful. He must really feel awful. I think I will go help him." But if that is not my response then I am bitter, and it is my sin, not his.

I believe that this sin is a major hindrance to revival in this country. When Christians start confessing their sins, they will be able to forgive the sins of others.