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## Avoid Bitterness; It's Lethal

**W**hile sitting on a bench outside a rustic chapel, I felt deeply troubled.<sup>1</sup> It was the last hour of a long weekend retreat.

*What's wrong with me, I thought. As a youth group leader, I should show Christ's love and understanding. But I can't! What keeps bottling up my mind?*

I groaned an inward prayer: *Jesus, when are you going to step in and do something about this?*

Suddenly, I sensed someone approaching. I glanced up and saw my friend Joe, a church leader in our area.

"How was your weekend?" he asked.

"Rough," I replied. A moment of silence passed while I considered sharing my disappointment.

"Something inside of me stopped me from being myself. And my group suffered as a result," I finally said.

Joe responded sympathetically by describing an incident that had made him bitter, eroding his emotional and spiritual health. As I listened to him, I had a distinct feeling that Christ was speaking through him to me.

*Perhaps my emotional distress is linked to bitterness, I thought. Is there anyone toward whom I feel frequent anger?* I questioned myself.

My mind quickly focused on a friend who had betrayed my trust. For months, his offense had caused bitter annoyance in the back of my mind.

Some time later, I learned how to get rid of that bitterness—in the next chapter I will share the steps I took—and I sensed a gradual release from bondage. I joyfully rediscovered the sweet inner liberty that had evaded me like a mirage.

Since that experience, I have been intrigued by the causes and eroding effects of bitterness. I am convinced that Satan uses it constantly to crush lives. Yet bitterness is so subtle that many Christians view it as less dangerous than some of the more obvious sins.

Anger may come and go, but unfortunately that is not usually the case with bitterness. Bitter feelings will often remain with a person for years. In fact, in my counseling I have met many people, including the elderly, whose bitterness began in their youth.

That is why the writer of Hebrews aptly referred to it as a “bitter root” (Heb. 12:15). Like a root, bitterness can grow and spread for years, entangling our attitudes, feelings, and thoughts.

Why do people become bitter? Three major causes exist. First, every person has strong needs to love and be unconditionally loved, to feel worthwhile to themselves and to others. Each one of us is equipped with a mental radar screen that detects whether or not those needs are being met. The needs and the radar device are built into us by God.

If a person registers a negative message, they feel cheated and deeply wounded inside. Seeds of anger may then germinate, which, if nourished by further evidences of unmet needs, can grow into a root of bitterness.

A second major cause for bitterness is personal loss. Losing something or someone suddenly may be intolerable, and impossible to accept. Mental revolt occurs, which can cause and then feed the bitterness. Because we live in a hazardous, fallen world, many kinds of losses are possible. Financial loss is an example. An overwhelming wave of bitterness became evident in the wake of the Great Crash of 1929. Unable to accept and endure the sudden reversal of fortune, many people reacted bitterly by ending their own lives. Perhaps this is a picture of things to come.

Loss of health, whether sudden or gradual, can also precipitate bitterness. What a crushing blow it is to a person's equilibrium to learn that he has a blood disease or cancer leading to great pain and perhaps even death. With one stroke, such a loss can change the whole climate of one's mind, causing intense agitation against God and life itself.

Loss of meaning in life is a further possible cause of bitterness. Many people count on finding meaning in life solely by amassing important achievements, but sadly at the expense of cultivating a personal, love-relationship with Christ. For a season, a certain level of satisfaction may be reached. But then, before long, the law of diminishing returns sets in.

Such people eventually reach the point where the more time and energy they invest in achievements, the less, in proportion, they receive in terms of meaning. Disillusionment and bitterness then emerge toward life for promising so much, yet delivering so little.

I do not suggest that achievements should not be pursued.

Achievements surely are important and can bring continued joy when they are in accordance with God's will. But building a friendship with Christ must be placed at the top of our list of priorities. Only then will He enrich our lives with a lasting sense of meaning.

Several losses occurring simultaneously are especially apt to provoke bitterness. Consider Job. Having lost his dear children, livestock, and health, he cried out: "I loathe my very life: therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul" (Job 10:1).

In addition to unmet needs and personal losses, sinful attitudes can also cause bitterness. It is interesting that God so created human beings that when sinful attitudes such as envy, jealousy, and pride emerge in our lives, we are drawn down a path leading to bitterness.

It is evident that jealousy and pride triggered King Saul's bitterness. Following David's conquest of Goliath, women from different cities visited Saul. In a festive mood, they played musical instruments and sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7).

Immediately, Saul burned with jealousy and wounded pride, both of which triggered bitterness. He found it intolerable that some young, unknown shepherd could detract from his own glorious popularity among the people.

I am familiar with a Christian organization in which several staff members scrupulously critiqued each other's performance with questions such as: Who is most popular? Who holds the highest esteem in the eyes of others? And who is most spiritual?

The ones who seemed to be on the losing end of this win/lose contest of personalities erupted with jealousy, obviously toward the deemed winners. Bitterness then crept in, causing crude

power struggles for authority, control, and popularity. Sadly, this contaminated their relationships and sabotaged the overall success of the organization.

Examining our reactions in view of these three major sources of bitterness should help us to identify any existing bitterness in our own lives. Bitterness usually has one or more objects. It is usually directed toward another person, God, and/or oneself. Let's explore this, beginning with other people.

A bitter reaction might normally erupt toward another person when we feel betrayed, hurt, or offended by them. Their chosen actions and words—or even the lack of them—can leave us feeling wounded, then angry, then bitter.

That happened to Ben, a college student. In counseling, it became clear that he had longed for unconditional love from his parents—love without any strings attached. Coupled with this was a constant hunger for parental approval, especially from his father. Yet Ben's cravings remained unsatisfied.

Though his father was a committed Christian and a pastor, Ben was bombarded with nonverbal messages like: "If you get good grades, excel in sports, and especially prove to be a good Christian model, *then* I will love and accept you. *Then* you will be OK." Thus, in Ben's mind, his acceptability in his father's eyes depended on which certain performance levels he reached. Because everything had to be earned, everything was conditional. Consequently, always having to prove himself—always having to do a tap dance—Ben felt cheated and deeply wounded inside, begetting bitterness, especially toward his father.

All too often, I come across people like Ben, who have been emotionally abused by conditional love from parents and others; we find this frequently, even in Christian homes. Such people have been torn apart inside by a love that was not secure, not in a

watertight compartment, not a gift, and therefore unlike Christ's (see Rom. 15:7; 1 John 4:7–12).

For some, God is another object of bitterness. The possible reasons for this are many. For example, bitterness can emerge toward God from cultivating a distasteful, twisted image of Him. Let me explain.

Those holding any belief in God naturally try to construct a mental image of Him. To create this picture, impressions are drawn from a variety of experiences. Each new impression acts like a successive brushstroke on a painting, adding new colors and lines until a certain image takes shape.

As part of this process, a person has a strong tendency to see God like their natural father. In other words, they tend to superimpose the image held toward their father, good or bad, onto God. If, therefore, they had a good father figure, they most likely will hold a healthy, positive image of God as well.

On the other hand, if their father appeared repulsive, God will probably also be seen as repulsive. Those whose fathers are usually emotionally distant tend to feel that God is also distant. Those whose fathers are oppressive tend to feel that God is oppressive. Whatever the negative connection, constant misreadings of God's real intents and nature then occur, precipitating bitterness toward Him.

Thinking again of Ben, because his father's love was conditional and fickle, he saw God's love the same way. Having superimposed his father's image onto God, Ben perceived God as a celestial kill-joy, who harshly demanded perfection but could never bring Himself to say: "I love you, Ben. I accept you. You are pleasing to Me."

Thus, instead of basking in the rays of Christ's lovingkindness and thankfully serving Him in response to it, Ben felt that God's love had a price tag. It had to be earned. But he never knew when



he had done enough.

Finally, Ben concluded that he could never measure up in Christ's eyes, that God was always angry and frustrated with his poor track record. Futility consequently set in, along with intense anger: "I can't do anything right! And that's where You come in, God. You sure blew it when You made me! You're cruel. So You go Your way, and I'll go mine!"

Personal loss has been shown to be a major source of bitterness. When loss occurs, many people blame God for either allowing or causing it. "God, doesn't Your power permit You to control everything? Why, then, did this happen? Where's all of this love and mercy we hear so much about?"

What such people overlook is that many losses are not God's responsibility but result from ill-choices made by us or others, which actually run against the grain of God's will. For example, losses resulting from a painful divorce are never part of His plan for marriage.

Surely, some losses occur unexpectedly, through no fault of our own, such as severe illness or the death of a loved one. And it is at such times that Christ especially empathizes with us. Far beyond our human comprehension, He has suffered tremendous personal loss. Two thousand years ago, Christ underwent excruciating mental pain on the cross, while agonizing, in some eternal sense, over the loss of His own Father's love and intimacy. Every day thousands are eternally lost to His enemy. So God knows all about the pain caused by personal loss. He can empathize with us.

The third possible object of bitterness is oneself. Bitterness can be directed inward as well as toward others and God. What accounts for this? Self-directed bitterness usually occurs when we relentlessly blame ourselves for failing miserably. Though confession might follow, we nevertheless persist in assaulting ourselves,

instead of breathing in God's forgiveness and then directing it inward. Instead of treating ourselves as Christ did, with kindness and patience, we brutalize ourselves.

Another cause of self-directed bitterness is the lifestyle centered on lusts. The creed "If it feels good, do it," without considering the consequences for oneself and others, has been adopted by many. Yet, the human mind is so designed that when lusts rule a person's heart, they can come to detest themselves. This usually results from the eventual awareness that an indulgent life leads to boredom, degradation, and dishonor. Worse still is the person's realization that their selfish pursuits have left others deeply scarred along the way.

Bitterness toward self can also emerge from the way a person was raised. Especially when we are young, there exists a strong, instinctual drive to discover who we are, to capture our identity. And our self-image is largely shaped by how we perceive significant people like parents, siblings, peers, and teachers viewing us.

Parents play a key role here. We draw major conclusions about ourselves through their eyes. More specifically, verbal and non-verbal messages are recorded from our parents onto our "parent tape." What is recorded are the perceived meanings behind their attitudes, gestures, words, and actions.

Then, having made this recording, we play the tape over and over in our minds, thereby feeding ourselves the same messages we have received from our parents. As a result, we tend to treat and view ourselves as they did. In view of this, if a person's parent tape is filled with negative, unrealistic messages about him or her, then he or she may treat and view themselves in ways that create self-directed bitterness.

To clarify what I mean, think again of Ben. Having recorded and then replayed conditional messages received from his par-

ents, he could not unconditionally accept himself, nor identify his God-given value. And since everything—his parents' love, God's view of him, and his own self-concept—seemed to depend on success, it was either “do or die” in every win/lose situation.

Because so much was emotionally at stake with every challenge, namely his parents' acceptance, God's acceptance, and self-acceptance, Ben revolted at the slightest hint of defeat, triggering intense self-directed criticism, leading to self-rejection and then self-directed bitterness.

In counseling, Ben discovered that the harsh suggestions recorded from the past could be erased and replaced by new messages from his eternal Father. These recorded, God-sent messages could then be replayed in his mind, replacing the self-rejection with self-acceptance.

More specifically, Ben came to see that Christ unconditionally loved him and that His love was secure, in a watertight compartment (Ps. 36:5–10; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:7–21). Moreover, Christ showed His grace, or unconditional acceptance, toward him (Rom. 15:7; 1 Tim. 1:14). Ben began to realize that there are no conditions and no hidden agendas to receiving God's love and acceptance. They are gifts, wonderful gifts, and can only be received as gifts. God's love is like sunlight: a person can do nothing to either lessen or intensify its power, but only bask in its warmth!

Ben learned that even if he were totally paralyzed, God's loving acceptance of him would be no less than if he became a missionary to Africa. For God's love and acceptance are not based on any performance levels reached, but rather on His own character. Along with this, Ben soon realized that God had made him into a unique, special person. Though sometimes beset with sin, he was not a worthless worm but possessed immeasurable value because

God had placed it there. As stated in Psalm 139:14: “I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Next, Ben discovered that he could treat and view himself as Christ did. Because God was kind to and patient with him, he could be kind to and patient with himself. Because Christ gave him the gift of unconditional love and grace (unconditional acceptance), he could unconditionally accept himself. He could give the gift of grace to himself, enabling him to become, like Stephen, “full of God’s grace and power” (Acts 6:8).

Now, as a result, with these truths branded in Ben’s mind, especially the promise of God’s unconditional love, there is much less emotionally at stake when facing new tasks, making him feel less threatened and more relaxed. God’s grace has become sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9).

“But didn’t Ben become self-centered?” you might ask. No. Just the opposite occurred. You see, there is a big difference between the self-acceptance found in Christ and the self-centered pride found in ourselves. The realization that we are accepting something that God made—that we had no hand in our own creation—breeds humility.

I enjoy the beautiful painting of the Swiss Alps hanging in my office. But there is no way I could become haughty about it, for I did not paint it. Likewise, how can we become arrogant about something that God, in His power and wisdom, designed and created?

So Ben grew in humility. And because the emotional pain of past rejections and self-rejection was healed, he gained newfound freedom to serve God and others. Not only that, but Ben’s drive to serve Christ grew, not from striving to earn His love but out of deep gratitude for having received it as a gift already! Thus, godly self-acceptance is not synonymous with egotistical pride. Rather,

it breeds humility and frees a person up to a life of joyous service!

But bitterness acts like an acid or cancer, eating away at our emotional, physical, and spiritual health. It also crushes relationships. This happens mostly because, when infected, the mind instinctively focuses on one reaction, revenge.

When bitter, the mind draws upon its resources to plan and initiate acts of vengeance. This process acts like a nation's mobilization of its human and material resources to successfully wage war against its enemy. That is why so many words and actions are heavily laced with attack overtones. As we said before, bitterness can be held toward others, God, and oneself. Revenge can be leveled at any of these, operating on either a conscious or unconscious level. Let's explore examples in connection with all three.

When a person feels hurt or is offended by another person and reacts with bitterness, they then search for ways to get even. The means available to them are almost unlimited and include: character assassination, cheating, gossip, lying, name-calling, physical and verbal attacks, withdrawal, and withholding love. Whatever means the wronged person chooses, they need to employ much creativity and savvy to maximize the pain in the other person.

Several years ago, Dick joined the Bible study and sharing group to which I belonged. Since he was a new believer, he was full of questions—refreshing questions—some of which inspired everyone to grow. The acceptance and warmth that Dick received helped him quickly to feel like a part of our group.

Several months later another person, Ted, joined our group. He also added new dimensions to it, but for different reasons. Ted's refreshing bluntness encouraged some others to strip away their masks. He had a way of helping others to be themselves.

Unfortunately, from the onset, Dick did not share the group's acceptance of Ted. Someone new was getting attention, and that

made Dick feel less wanted. But he was wrong, because both of them were warmly received.

Consequently, stirred with jealousy, Dick became embittered toward Ted. Wanting to attack, he shunned him. Whenever Ted spoke up, Dick acted aloof and bored. Even hearing Ted's name in conversation made him feel uncomfortable. And because Dick never brought himself to accept Ted, he became soured on the whole group, to the point of leaving it altogether. For this and other reasons, Dick's unresolved bitterness hurt him more than anyone else.

In the past, when I was counseling disturbed, rebellious youth, I noticed that alcohol and drugs could be used as weapons. Many young people plunge into the drug world to scream at their parents: "Your love for me is so shallow! You act as if I count for nothing. So what difference does it make if I destroy myself? Now suffer!" Then, as they detect the pain their retaliative plan induces, they feel a twisted sense of satisfaction, which drives them even further into the dark world of drugs, irresponsibility, and self-centeredness.

Mental disorders can also provide the means for a bitter attack against another person. At first glance, such weapons may appear weak and ineffective. But they can be very potent in their pain-inducing power, as attested to by many.

Let me illustrate. Joan lived in a family full of achievers. Though she met every task with determination, she always felt lower than her more intelligent brothers and sisters.

Sadly, Joan's parents did not affirm her strong efforts, nor what she did right. Instead, they bombarded her with statements like: "Your report card shows B's while your brothers and sisters get mostly A's. Why can't you be more like them?"

By the time Joan left high school, it had dawned on her that

she could never be exactly like the others in her family. In her parents' eyes, she would always fall short. Consequently, she turned against them with bitterness and fierce wrath.

*I'll show them, Joan thought. Since they think I'm such a dud, I'll give them my worst. Then they'll really have something to worry about.* She began filling her mind with bizarre, irrational thoughts, which, over a period of time, became deeply entrenched patterns.

Joan withdrew her contact from people and created a fantasy world—a seemingly safe world—in which her needs supposedly could be met. She acted and spoke as she pleased regardless of how it affected others. Her actions tormented both of her parents with intense guilt and despair. Sadly, many mental disorders are bitter attacks on others. That is why so many disturbed people are angry and manipulative.

I might add that gnawing guilt also destroyed Joan's emotional health. Always feeling lower than her brothers and sisters (and, therefore, defeated in her parents' eyes), Joan carried a great burden of guilt. But hers was false guilt, guilt that God did not want her to have.

True moral guilt results from the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin in our lives. It is a signal from God indicating that something is wrong and in need of repair. To resolve true guilt, we must engage in "spiritual breathing." First, we exhale, confessing our sins. Next, we inhale, breathing in God's forgiveness, which enables us to forgive ourselves. Spiritual breathing complies with 1 John 1:9, which reads: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

False guilt, in contrast, does not find its source in God's wise judgments but in wrong conclusions caused by faulty thinking or destructive suggestions from others. Thus, unlike true guilt, it does not contain a redemptive quality. Instead, false guilt only

crushes and scars. Moreover, spiritual breathing does not resolve it. Rather, it must be recognized as false and then discarded.

Because of her parents' constant comparisons and unrealistic expectations, Joan always felt plagued by guilt (false guilt), even when trying her best. Consequently, in an effort to atone for that guilt, she tried to punish herself by causing, on a conscious and unconscious level, the onslaught of emotional upheaval. Thus, this drive for atonement, coupled with the bitter attacks leveled at her parents, caused the described emotional distress.

Parents can avoid the kinds of pressures placed on Joan by emphasizing to their children that, in God's eyes, real success comes from building strong Christian character. For here there are no win/lose situations. Because we can all become more like Christ, we can all win!

That is just a sample of how attacks of bitterness can be leveled at others. Everywhere we see Satan destroying churches, homes, people, and relationships. And revenge plays a very strategic role in his vicious plans.

God is the second possible object of bitter attack, for unbelievers and believers alike. Often, unbelievers raised in Christian homes will avoid anything smelling of Christianity, because, tragically, they have been taught that God is much quicker to judge than to love. They know He exists. But because God appears to them to be so negative and brutal, they choose to avoid Him and His commandments as a means of bitter protest. For many, the response is to embrace hedonistic, materialistic lifestyles.

When bitter at God, some believers strike out at Him as well. In fact, sometimes their attacks are harsher than those of unbelievers, especially when they draw the conclusion that God does not have their best in mind. Recently, I talked with a believer who had been asking God for a marriage partner for months. But



because this had not materialized, he mentally revolted against the Lord; then he began searching for friends in bars, in an effort to get even with God.

Further means of striking out at God include: criticizing other believers and Christian beliefs, cutting off church attendance and involvement, and living a double life with one foot in the church and the other in the world.

In addition to others and God, bitter attacks can also be leveled at oneself as a result of self-directed bitterness. Several years ago, I worked with a young person whose parents were killed in a freak car accident. After the accident, Stan unwittingly drew the conclusion that his parents' deaths were his fault. He blamed himself, even though his was clearly false guilt—guilt that God did not want him to have.

Consequently, Stan's self-directed bitterness grew, and he developed a vendetta against himself. Such self-directed attacks, coupled with a drive to punish himself in his effort to atone for the guilt, forced Stan to cut off every source of happiness. He dropped his close friends and began to drink.

Through counseling, Stan came to realize that his was not true guilt requiring confession, but rather false guilt. That realization enabled him to discard it. His self-directed bitterness was also healed through the four steps described in the next chapter. Stan's healing freed him up to rekindle interest in other people and life itself.

Self-directed attacks can harm us, not only emotionally and socially as in Stan's case, but physically as well, and even without our awareness of it. That is because bitterness, operating on an unconscious level, can activate certain dysfunctional impulses or signals in the nervous system, which, over a period of time, can cause physical problems. Some cases of high blood pressure, ulcers, and

other ailments are the products of this process.

Physical harm can result from conscious decisions as well. Suicide is the most potent way of getting even with oneself. Because it is so final, it represents the ultimate form of self-directed attack.

Further means of self-directed attacks include: incessant self-criticism, belittling oneself in the presence of others, excessive alcohol or drug intake, and setting oneself up for emotional, social, or vocational failure. Any means that contains a self-destructive element might be employed.

Thus we can see that bitter attacks, whether aimed at others, God, or oneself, can be lethal. Such attacks set into motion powerful forces of destruction. Those who are plagued by bitterness, therefore, need to be healed.

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