

Overcoming Bitterness

So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet (Ex 15:22-25).

God knows the hearts of His people better than they know their hearts themselves. Because our hearts are frequently not in the right place, He puts us in circumstances that reveal our shortcomings to us. When the new nation of Israel came out of Egypt their hearts were bitter and one of the first things God did for them was show them their fault. He did this by leading them for three days through a searing desert with no water only to bring them at last to an oasis with bitter water. God brought bitter people face to face with bitter water. This hard circumstance revealed the hearts of the people. After the people complained, God directed Moses to take a particular tree and cast it into the water which made the waters sweet.

We tend to think that circumstances cause us to become bitter, but this is not the case. Bitterness is not something that happens to us, it is a characteristic we develop. This can be seen easy enough in the lives of two different people faced with similar circumstances. I've known people to go through a lot of trials and hardships and maintain a grateful and gracious spirit throughout. I've seen others face similar trials only to become angry and embittered souls. In both cases the hardship revealed the heart more than it formed the heart. If we are filled with sweetness and something jostles us, then sweetness spills out. If we are filled with bitterness and we get jostled then battery acid goes everywhere.

Sometimes when bitterness spills out, we still don't see it for what it is. So, it may be helpful to point out some of its identifying characteristics.

First, bitterness differs from guilt in that guilt is how we feel when we realize we have wronged others, but bitterness is how we feel when we believe others have wronged us. Israel believed God and Moses had done them wrong by leading them out into the wilderness to die of thirst. This means our bitter feelings can result from incorrect perceptions as well as real offenses. It also shows us that bitterness can be directed at God as well as man and frequently when we think it is all directed at man it is really directed at God. We need to recognize that God often leads us into very difficult circumstances, as He did with Israel, and that He does so for our good whether we can see the good in it or not.

Second, bitterness is personal. Great sins committed against humanity in Iraq or some other place might appall us but they do not make us bitter. However, small offenses, "he doesn't pick his socks up off the floor," make us bitter. It is the *nearness* not the *enormity* of the sin that makes us bitter. This is why bitterness is usually felt toward fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, children, roommates, co-workers, business partners, neighbors and brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Third, bitterness is into details and it remembers everything. You have had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you have forgotten. But this one took place years ago, and you remember every single word, his intonation the inflection of his voice. You know exactly what happened, which means, you are bitter. Why can we remember the details so vividly? Because repetition is the mother of learning. We Review, Review, Review. Then he said “...” so I said to him “...”. These things stay with us because bitterness doesn’t want to go away. It wants to hang around and dominate our thinking till it chokes the life out of us.

The only thing to be done with bitterness is to *put it away* (Eph 4:31). This is because bitterness festers over time. We may be able to suppress it for a while, but sooner or latter an opportunity to bring up the past will arise and it will return with renewed vigor. Therefore, the Hebrew writer warns us to be aware *lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble* (Heb 12:5).

When once we recognize that bitterness has crept into our hearts, how can we go about getting rid of it? The first thing is to acknowledge that my bitterness is my sin. I own it. The other person’s sin isn’t the issue. We may not say, “I’ll stop being bitter, when they say they’re sorry.” My repentance cannot be contingent upon the repentance of others.

I’ve known people who were so bitter, that when the other person apologized they still couldn’t let it go. I’ve known people who remained bitter at people who were dead. The prisons are full of people who murdered the person at whom they were bitter and they are more bitter now than ever. A bitter person will stop being bitter, only when they confess it to God, repent of it and accept His pardon. When this happens it is often surprising how quickly the other person asks your forgiveness and, how easily you will be able to accept them.

The power to put away bitterness is just like the power to eliminate any other sin – it is a power that comes to us by the grace of God Eph 4:32 *And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.* Here we are told to take what we have been given and extend it to others. We serve a God who doesn’t ladle out forgiveness in a teaspoon, but pours it out in buckets. The true test of our standing in His grace is the measure of grace we extend to those who have wronged us. We don’t ever want to be in the position of the unmerciful servant who having been forgiven an immense debt, couldn’t forgive a trifle.

This means that if we get hit by a hard circumstance and bile begins to bubble up, the first thing we need to do is stop and thank God for revealing to us a reality that had previously escaped our notice. The next thing is to ask Him to cast a tree into our bitter water that will make it sweet. Of course, He has done just that. In the middle of history God placed a tree in the middle of the world and gave His Son to die on that tree in order to take away our bitterness and replace it with the sweetness of Christ who pled that His enemies might be pardoned.

Note: This article by Lawrence Kelley was inspired by a booklet written by Jim Wilson. If you are struggling with bitterness, you can order this booklet for a nominal fee at <http://www.ccmbooks.org/bookOrder.php>