

Bitterness

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Bitterness: The Root That Pollutes

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Bitterness

The Root That Pollutes

LOU PRIOLO


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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FRED CAME HOME from a late night at the office. After scarfing down his reheated supper, he went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. The moment he opened the vanity drawer and spied the tube of toothpaste that his wife had squashed *in the middle* (for the umpteenth time), he flew into a rage. Slamming the drawer closed and flailing his arms, he began verbally accosting Wilma in a rather loud and irritated tone of voice.

“That woman! She’s always squeezing the toothpaste tube in the middle. I’ve asked her a thousand times to roll it up from the end. But does she listen to me? Never! I might as well talk to the toothpaste tube itself rather than ask her to do something for me. She is the most stubborn, pigheaded woman I’ve ever met. How would she like it if I ignored her incessant requests? She wouldn’t like that one bit.”

At this point, Fred stopped speaking out loud but continued to muse over the toothpaste tube as he internally plotted to get even.

“I’ll teach her a lesson. She hates it when anyone in the family forgets to replace the cap on the toothpaste tube. So, I’m going to leave it off. Tomorrow morning when she comes in here to brush her teeth, she’ll be furious that I ‘forgot’ to replace the cap, and that will ruin her whole morning. And maybe, if I’m lucky, the toothpaste will harden overnight in the neck of the tube, and when she goes to squeeze some out, she won’t be able to. And just maybe, she’ll look into the neck of the tube as she tries to firmly squeeze it, and a

little pellet of hardened toothpaste will pop out of the tube and hit her smack between the eyes!”

Now let me ask you, is a squashed tube of toothpaste worth expending all of that emotional energy? Hardly! What kind of response does a tube of toothpaste that has been repeatedly squashed in the middle deserve? If the toothpaste incident can't be overlooked altogether, then (at the very most) about all the time, effort, and thought that one should devote to it is something along these lines:

“Oh, look at that! She squashed the toothpaste tube in the middle again. Maybe we ought to invest in individual tubes.”

When we exert inordinate amounts of emotional energy over such trivial disappointments, it's a good indication we may be bitter.

What Is Bitterness?

One of the biblical words for *bitterness* literally describes the bitter taste of certain foods and drinks. The verb translated “to be bitter” means “to cut” or “to prick.” 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.

Bitterness is the result of not forgiving others. If you are bitter at someone, it means that you haven't truly forgiven that person. To put it another way, bitterness is the result of responding improperly (unbiblically) to an offense.

The Scripture likens bitterness to a root:

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled. (Heb. 12:15)

Roots have to be planted. So let me ask you, “What do you suppose is the seed that when planted in the soil of our hearts sprouts into a root of bitterness?”

Generally speaking, it is a *hurt*. When someone hurts you,¹ it is as if that person dropped a seed of bitterness onto the soil of your heart. At that point, you can choose to respond in two ways. Either you can reach down and pluck up the seed by forgiving your offender, or you can begin to cultivate the seed by reviewing the hurt over and over again in your mind. Bitterness is the result of dwelling too long on a hurt. Again, it is the indication that one has not truly forgiven an offender (cf. Matt. 18:34–35).

Veronica’s best friend, Betty, had been planning a sleepover for all the girls in the youth group. All summer long, the party was the topic of discussion. Everyone was going to be there. Three days before the sleepover, Veronica found out that some old family friends were coming over the weekend of the party. Although Betty’s party had been scheduled months before, Veronica’s father wanted her to drop her “silly little party plans” and stay at home with their houseguests. Veronica knew that all the popular people would be at the sleepover, in addition to all her friends. Plus, she made a commitment to the party long before she even knew about her father’s plans. Veronica’s father insisted that she stay home. He has just dropped a seed of hurt onto the soil of her heart.

Veronica’s seed of hurt could be easily transformed into a root of bitterness:

1. The hurt can be real or imagined; it makes no difference. The result is the same. If you do not deal with it biblically you will become bitter. If I hurt you as a result of my sin and you choose not to overlook it or cover it in love (Prov. 17:9; 1 Peter 4:8), you must follow Luke 17:3 and pursue me with the intent of granting me forgiveness, and I must repent. If you get your feelings hurt as a result of something I did that was not a sin, you must repent of your unbiblical thinking that caused you to be “offended” at something that was not a sin.

Veronica's Internal Thoughts	Cultivation of Veronica's Bitterness
"I can't believe he's doing this to me! I've been planning to go to this sleepover all summer long."	Veronica presses the seed an inch or two into the soil of her heart.
"He's so selfish. All he thinks about is what he wants."	Veronica covers the seed with more soil.
"He is never willing to let me have fun if he thinks his precious plans might be upset."	Veronica aerates the soil.
"Why did I get stuck with a father like him?"	Veronica waters the seed.
"He's such a loser!"	Veronica fertilizes her hurt and it starts to sprout.
"I can't wait until I can get out of here. Then nobody will be able to spoil my fun."	Veronica weeds her little sprout, and its roots grow deeper.
"He can't do this to me. I'm going to give him a taste of his own medicine. I am going to embarrass him so badly that he'll wish that he had sent me to the sleepover in a limousine."	Veronica puts the finishing touches on the greenhouse that houses her stinkweed and begins charging people admission to see it.

Veronica allowed her hurt feelings to paralyze her from taking the appropriate action (such as respectfully obeying and perhaps appealing graciously to her father), replayed his "offense" over and over again in her mind, and consequently became embittered against him.

Evidences of Bitterness

What are the indications that we have become bitter toward another?² In my almost twenty-five years of counseling I have come across a few possible indicators of bitter-

2. If you are bitter, you probably need little verification. The Bible says, "The heart knows its own bitterness" (Prov. 14:10).

ness. I offer them for your consideration. With how many of these can you personally identify? Begin by thinking about the people closest to you.

Difficulty in resolving conflicts. Trying to resolve conflicts with someone you are unwilling to forgive is like trying to build a skyscraper without first laying a solid foundation. The bitterness will doom the project before it gets off the ground.

Acts of vengeance. Whether it takes the form of a backbiting verbal comment to another, a spiteful remark to the offender's face, or some kind of physical altercation, taking one's own vengeance is a sure sign of unforgiveness.

Withdrawal. When we give our offenders "the silent treatment" or "the cold shoulder," we are likewise being vindictive. We are saying (essentially), "Look, I've tried to tell you over and over again how much it bugs me when you do (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 little taste of your own medicine. When I think you have an inkling of how much you've hurt me—perhaps in a day or two—I'll start talking to you again!"

Outbursts of anger. As we saw with Fred, bitterness tempts us to overreact emotionally. When we are bitter, we don't see each new offense on a clean slate that is relatively easy to forgive, but rather as one more item on a long and growing list of similar offenses under a common heading (e.g., "Hurtful Things She Has Said to Me Over the Years").

Biting sarcasm. Ironic intonations, snide remarks, mean-spirited joking, caustic comments, scornful replies,