



How Big of a Burden is Bitterness?

Ephesians 4:31: (NKJV) "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice."

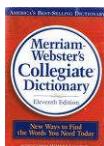
"Never succumb to the temptation of bitterness."
- Martin Luther King, Jr.

We all have had experiences in our lives that have left a bitter taste in our mouths. Whether it is a self-inflicted emotional wound that brings the bitterness or a wound that comes from someone or somewhere else, the fact is, we are wounded and we become bitter. So, what does bitterness do? Is it ever helpful in any way? Is holding bitterness a practice nourishes us or is holding bitterness a practice that eats us alive from the inside out? How do we recognize bitterness and how do we eradicate it from our lives? Today we look into a Biblical perspective on the burden of bitterness.

Questions for consideration:

1. What is Bitterness?
2. Where does Bitterness come from and what can it do to us?
3. How can we manage and eliminate Bitterness in our lives?

1. What is Bitterness?

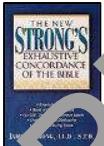


Merriam - Webster online Dictionary:

bit·ter Function: adjective

- 1: being or inducing the one of the four basic taste sensations that is peculiarly acrid, astringent, or disagreeable and suggestive of an infusion of hops
- 2: marked by intensity or severity:
 - a: accompanied by severe pain or suffering <a bitter death>
 - b: being relentlessly determined <a bitter partisan>
 - c: exhibiting intense animosity <bitter enemies>
 - d: harshly reproachful
- 3: expressive of severe pain, grief, or regret <bitter tears>

Some Old Testament words:



Bitter: Strong's #4785 Marah (maw-raw'); bitter; Marah, a place in the Desert: the spring with bitter water which was three days travel from the crossing place of the Red Sea in the peninsula of Sinai

Exodus 15:23: "And when they came to Marah <4785>, they could not drink of the waters of Marah <4785>, for they were bitter <4751>; therefore the name of it was called Marah <4785>."

Bitter: Strong's #4751 mar (mar); or (feminine) marah (maw-raw'); bitter (literally or figuratively); also (as noun) bitterness, or (adverbially) bitterly:

Genesis 27:34: "And when Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and exceeding bitter <4751> cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father."

Bitter: Strong's #4844 meror (mer-ore'); or merowr (mer-ore') bitter herb, bitterness

Exodus 12:8: "And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter <4844> herbs they shall eat it."



Some New Testament Words:

Bitter: Strong's #4087 pikraino (pik-rah'-ee-no) to make bitter 1a) to produce a bitter taste in the stomach 2) to embitter. 2a) render angry, indignant 2b) to be embittered, irritated

Colossians 3:19: "Husbands, love your wives, and **be <4087>** not **bitter <4087>** against them."

Bitter: Strong's #4088 pikria (pik-ree'-ah); acridity (especially poison), literally or figuratively bitter gall, extreme wickedness, bitterness, bitter hatred

Acts 8:23: "For I perceive that thou art in the gall of **bitterness <4088>**, and in the bond of iniquity."

Bitter: Strong's #4089 pikros (pik-ros'); bitter, harsh, virulent.

James 3:11: "Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and **bitter <4089>?"**

James 3:14: "But if ye have **bitter <4089>** envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth."

"It is a simple but sometimes forgotten truth that the greatest enemy to present joy and high hopes is the cultivation of retrospective bitterness." - Robert G. Menzies

2. Where does Bitterness come from and what can it do to us?

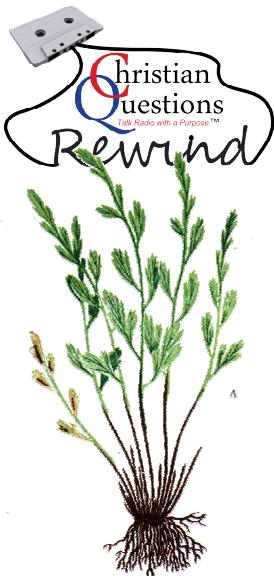
Bitterness can often be self-inflicted and come from our own poor choices:

Genesis 27:34-36: (NRSV) ³⁴When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me also, father!" ³⁵But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." ³⁶Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"

Esau blamed Jacob and complained bitterly, but Hebrews 12:16 gives a different perspective.

Bitterness as a result of our choices can give us the "it's his fault" perspective on life:

Hebrews 12:7-17: (NRSV) ⁷Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. ¹²Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. ¹⁴Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. ¹⁶See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷You



know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears."

- Once we adopt "it's his fault," our angst becomes misdirected and we lose our objectivity;
- Now that we have angst, it grows without inhibition secretly within us;
- That root having taken a stronghold can now begin to affect others;
- The result is MANY are defiled.

Bitterness can come because we forsake God's ways:

Jeremiah 2:19-20: (NRSV) *"¹⁹Your wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God; the fear of me is not in you, says the Lord GOD of hosts. ²⁰For long ago you broke your yoke and burst your bonds, and you said, "I will not serve!" On every high hill and under every green tree you sprawled and played the harlot."*

Bitterness can come because our hearts are out of harmony with God:

Acts 8:21-23: (NRSV) *"²¹You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. ²²Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness."*

Bitterness can come because we rely on earthly and devilish reasoning:

James 3:14-16: (NRSV) *"¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁵For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."*

As a result of bitterness finding one or these paths into our heart, we now become vulnerable.

"It is hardly possible to build anything if frustration, bitterness and a mood of helplessness prevail."

- Lech Walesa

Consider these for help with bitterness:

Psalm 41:10-13: *"But You, O LORD, be merciful to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them. By this I know that You are well pleased with me, because my enemy does not triumph over me. As for me, You uphold me in my integrity, and set me before Your face forever. Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting! Focus instead of the love God has for you and He will heal your bitterness."*

Philippians 3:13: *"Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,"* The Apostle Paul could have been bitter in many circumstances because of all that happened to him. Bitterness is self-defeating.

Proverbs 4:23: *"Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life."*

Bitterness is the opposite of sweetness!



It makes us numb to the reality of sin within ourselves:

Acts 8:9-23: (NRSV) “⁹Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. ¹⁰All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” ¹¹And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹²But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place. ¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹saying, “Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” ²⁰But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money! ²¹You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. ²²Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.”

- Bitterness forms in the “*intent of your heart*” and then produces an unmanageable ego - you must be the center of victory;

Isaiah 14:13-14: (NKJV) “¹³For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north. ¹⁴I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’”

- That ego becomes the primary influence upon your conscience
- Now you determine right from wrong based upon its effect on your personal status - “How does it affect me?”
- The gall of bitterness - numb to the Spirit and bound to the wretchedness of sin

Deuteronomy 29:18-19: (NKJV) “¹⁸so that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood; ¹⁹and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart’—as though the drunkard could be included with the sober.”

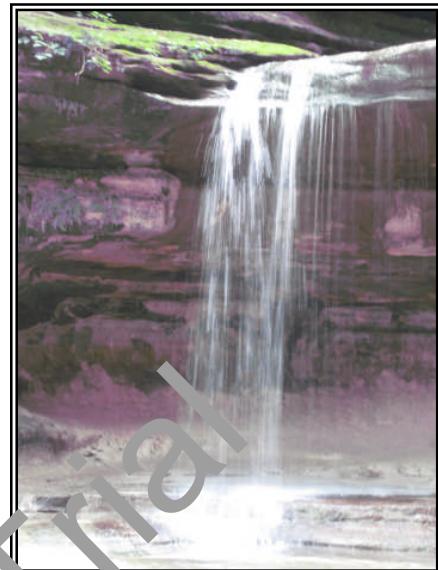
- You are now “bound in chains of wickedness.”

1 Timothy 4:1-3: (NKJV) “¹Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, ²speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, ³forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”



Bitterness creates in us fountains of pride:

James 3:7-18: (NRSV) *"⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. ¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."*



- Once bitterness has taken root, it poisons our words. We then spread the poison to others.
- We become a walking contradiction, speaking both blessing and cursing.
- We now pollute our spiritual environment with unspiritual and devilish attitudes.
- Now, rather than witnessing to the Gospel, our lives witness against it!

Bitterness can come to us as a result of mistreatment:

1 Samuel 22:1-2: (NRSV) *"David left there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; when his brothers and all his father's house heard of it, they went down there to him. ²Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him, and he became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about four hundred."*

- Being mistreated often leads to an inability to trust
- Being mistreated often leads us to become perpetrators of that same mistreatment!

Bitterness can come to us as a result of a tragic loss:

Jeremiah 31:15: *"Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter <8563> weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not."*

We can build our life around what we don't deserve, rather than around what we can learn from it to help others. It absolutely is our choice.

Bitterness can come thru the folly of your child:

Proverbs 17:25: *"A foolish son is a grief to his father, and bitterness <4470> to her that bare him."*



Bitterness and selfishness are twin brothers that don't belong in our hearts. So, what do we do with all of this? It seems as though bitterness can enter at every turn and enter easily and stealthily. Once in, it quietly takes root, masked as what we might consider "justifiable anger" or a "justifiable reaction" to wrong, or simply a "justifiable defense" of one's own self. Then it grows quietly and under the surface at first, so we are comfortable with it until one day we wake up and it rules our life.

"Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hate. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness." - William Arthur Ward

Can bitter experiences ever be good for us? It depends on how we react to it. It could be a catalyst to move us forward.

Seeing evil deceptions:

Esther 3:13-14: (NRSV) *"¹³Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day."*

Esther 4:1: (KJV) *"When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry;"*

The Realization of an ancestral sin:

Zechariah 12:9-10: (NRSV) *"⁹And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. ¹⁰And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn."*

What do these examples teach us?

- It is possible that a bitter experience can awaken us to the most positive of actions
- It is possible to have a bitter experience without owning a bitter attitude

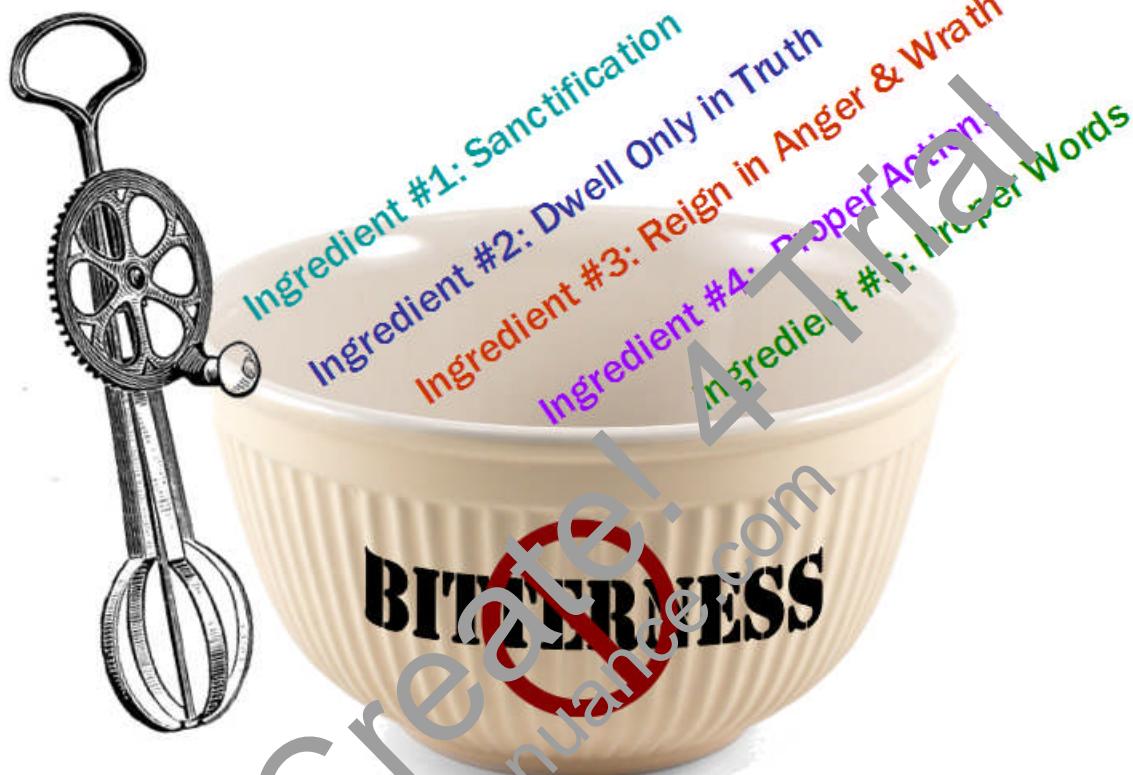
3. How can we manage and eliminate bitterness in our lives?

The context of Ephesians 4:31 (our theme verse) provides a formula or recipe for combating and overcoming bitterness in our lives:

Ephesians 4:23-4:32: (NKJV) *"²³and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. ²⁵Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another. ²⁶"Be angry, and do not sin" do not let the sun go down on your wrath, ²⁷nor give place to the devil. ²⁸Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. ²⁹Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness, wrath, anger,*

clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. ³²And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."

These Scriptures give us a number of "ingredients" to help us put bitterness in perspective. These help us see it and eradicate it from our lives.



Ingredient #1: Sanctification

Ephesians 4:23-24: (NKJV) ^{“23}and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

*Bitterness
is the
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Find the true meaning of sanctification (to be set apart for a holy purpose) in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7: (NKJV) ^{“3}For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because call us to uncleanness, but in holiness."

There is no honor in bitterness. This is a "back to basics" step - finding again that first love of truth and righteousness that compelled us to walk away from evil.

Ingredient #2: Dwell Only in Truth

It is not enough to merely abstain from lying, we must be sure to proactively speak the truth as well.



Ephesians 4:25: "Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another."

John 8:32: (NKJV) "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

"Bitterness imprisons life; love releases it." -Harry Emerson Fosdick

The truth of God should provoke us to move forward in life.

Ingredient #3: Reign in Anger and Wrath:

Ephesians 4:26: "²⁶Be angry, and do not sin" do not let the sun go down on your wrath, ²⁷nor give place to the devil."

(Source: *Bible Commentator Matthew Poole*:) Be ye angry and sin not: by way of concession, rather than by way of command: If the case be such that ye must be angry, yet see it be without sin. Let not the sun go down upon your wrath; if your anger is excessive, (for so this word signifies, being different from the former), yet let it not be lasting: be reconciled 'ere the sun go down.

Don't let anger consume you. This is telling us that the act of harboring anger and wrath is not merely an emotional response but in fact it is a choice. It is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to act on that anger in a sinful manner.

Proverbs 14:29: "He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly."

Romans 12:19-21: (NKJV) "¹⁹Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Ingredient #4: Proper Actions

Do not continue in habits of life that damage; rather replace them with activities of life that contribute:

Ephesians 4:18: "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need."

2 Corinthians 8:10-12: (NKJV) "¹⁰And in this I give advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; ¹¹but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. ¹²For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have."

Romans 12:9-13: (NKJV) "⁹Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ¹¹not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹²rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; ¹³distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality."

Hopefully it is becoming obvious that to harbor and dwell in bitterness is a choice, just as it is a choice to seek out and dwell in wisdom. With greater wisdom comes greater humility and the greater the humility in our lives, the greater the ability to suffocate roots of bitterness.



Ingredient #5: Proper Words

This is the test of our words, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks!

Ephesians 4:29: "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers."

Philippians 4:7-8: (NKJV) ⁷...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things."

What is bitterness?

- It is a waste of perfectly good emotional energy;
- It is a poor excuse for not taking positive action;
- It is our personal expression of laziness regarding our own destiny;
- It is a symptom of an ego gone bad;
- It is a complete waste of time!

"Growth in wisdom may be exactly measured by decrease in wisdom." — Friedrich Nietzsche



Ever notice how your first piece of sour candy causes a huge reaction, but the more you eat, the less you notice? That's similar to how bitterness is able to take root in our hearts until we barely notice it is there, contaminating us and those around us.

*So how big a burden is bitterness?
For Jonathan and Rick (and Vicki) and Christian Questions,
Think about it...!*

For Your Continued Study:

We ran out of time! Here are additional Scriptures on Ingredient #5 for your consideration:

James 4:11-12: (NRSV) ¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. ¹²Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?"



1 Peter 1:22-23: (NRSV) *"²²Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God."*

Seek to replace the bitterness with the peace of God and rest in God:

Hebrews 4:11-16: (NKJV) *"¹¹Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. ¹²For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. ¹³And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. ¹⁴Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*