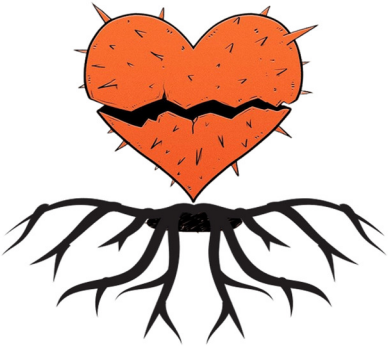


## Am I Too Bitter to Be Better?

**Ephesians 4:31: (NLT) *Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior.***



It is easy to live with bitterness. We are not suggesting that it is initially comfortable, but we are suggesting that being bitter towards one or many people or circumstances is considered acceptable in our society. We know it is acceptable because if we pay attention, we will see that the harsh and angry results of a bitter temperament are widely encouraged. Bitterness can enter at every turn, easily and stealthily. Once in, it quietly takes root, masked as what we might consider justifiable anger or a justifiable reaction to a wrong, or simply justifiable defenses of one's own self. Then it grows - quietly and under the surface at first so that we become comfortable with it - until one day we wake up and it rules our life.

To describe bitterness:



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**Bitterness**

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- Because it becomes comfortable it is easy to live with.
- It is dangerous because it reformats the way we look at the world. It changes the way we see things.
- It is constricting. In a bitter heart, there is no joy, and no creativity because resentment displaces everything else.
- It is corrosive, killing friendships and relationships. It is *not* comfortable to be with a bitter person.
- It is lonely and easily creeps in when we have been wronged by someone, or THINK we have been wronged by someone, or feel that things did not turn out the way we hoped they would.
- It is complex because it combines anger, sadness and often disappointment, so it is hard to root out and get rid of.

Let's begin with some New Testament words for bitter:

**Bitter:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #4087 *pikraino*; to embitter (literally or figuratively)

Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon 1) 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: (KJV) *Husbands, love your wives, and **be** <4087> not **bitter** <4087> against them.***

**Bitterness:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #4088 *pikria*; acridity (especially poison), literally or figuratively

Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon: 1a) extreme wickedness  
1b) a bitter root, and so producing a bitter fruit 1c) metaphorically bitterness, bitter hatred

**Vocabulary.com**

**Acridity:** noun

1. extreme bitterness
2. the quality of being sharply disagreeable in language or tone



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

**Bitter:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #4089 *pikros*; (through the idea of piercing); sharp (pungent), i.e., acrid (literally or figuratively)

Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon: 1) bitter 2) metaphorically harsh, virulent

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

These words and scriptures lay out the depth of the subject of bitterness. It is not something to take lightly. We need to clearly examine bitterness to make sure we understand how it affects us and how we can scripturally attack it to remove it from our lives.

We will examine bitterness in a broadening approach:

**1.** **First, we have a firm but general warning against bitterness:**  
**Ephesians 4:31:** (NLT) *Get rid of all **bitterness <4088>**, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior.*

**2.** **Second, we have a more detailed warning about how bitterness is expressed:**  
**James 3:8-11:** (NASB) <sup>8</sup>*But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; <sup>10</sup>from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. <sup>11</sup>Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and **bitter <4089>** water?*

**3.** **Third, we have a sad Old Testament example in Esau of the grip that bitterness holds from within:**  
**Hebrews 12:15-16:** (NASB) <sup>15</sup>*See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of **bitterness <4088>** springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; <sup>16</sup>that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.*

**4.** **Fourth, we have a vivid New Testament example of the rotten poison that bitterness is:**  
**Acts 8:22-23:** (NASB) <sup>22</sup>*Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup>For I see that you are in the gall of **bitterness <4088>** and in the bondage of iniquity.*

Bitterness is a very effective poison. We can easily have this form of selfishness lurking within us and not even recognize it.

We will come back to each of these scriptures to find where bitterness is vulnerable so we can get rid of it in our lives.

**Back to our first point, we are given a firm but general warning against bitterness:**

The Apostle Paul was encouraging the Ephesian Christians to live new lives. While our theme verse about bitterness is later in this context, Ephesians 4:21-30 leads up to it.





### **Bitterness rationalizes sinful behavior to appear righteous:**

**Ephesians 4:21-29:** (NLT) <sup>21</sup>Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, <sup>22</sup>throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. <sup>23</sup>Instead let the spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. <sup>24</sup>Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.

Notice that our *former life...is corrupted by lust and deception*. This is where bitterness has its home. The apostle says we need to *renew our thoughts and attitudes*; we need to change from our former way of life since we have *learned the truth that comes from Jesus*.

Bitterness can create excuses to *fulfill desire and rationalize deceptive behavior*.

### **These are two themes of a sinful life and can be two themes of a bitterness-driven existence:**

<sup>25</sup>So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body.

Bitterness rationalizes the reasons used to lie. It makes lying seem sensible - and that is wrong.

We said earlier that bitterness reformats how we look at the world. We become so skewed in our view of the problem and the people involved that we cannot trust our own thoughts will be godly, let alone our words or actions. Bitterness wears a mask of *rationalizations* and *justifications*. We are essentially lying to ourselves to keep that bitter, fermented anger fed because sometimes anger feels good!



Often we do not even see it as being bitter. We see it as, “This person did this and this to me,” or “This wasn’t the way my life was supposed to end up.” We build on disappointment, anger and resentment until we see things with a poisonous outlook. After a while, we might not even remember WHY we feel this way.

<sup>26</sup>And don’t sin by letting anger control you. Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, <sup>27</sup>for anger gives a foothold to the devil.

We have to deal with our anger. We cannot let it run rampant, especially if it is fed by bitterness. Bitterness easily provokes anger, which is self-defeating. Bitter anger will not help win any battles.

### **Paul now focuses on what to do. These are BETTER ways to act, rather than BITTER ways to act:**

<sup>28</sup>If you are a thief, quit stealing. Instead, use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need.

A key to managing bitterness is to stop our wrongdoing and start using our hands (actually or metaphorically) for good, productive things. We are then to give generously to others.



<sup>29</sup>Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

Any words we speak should be encouraging, not *foul or abusive*. Bitterness can be reflected in the language we generally use. As Christians, we want to lift ourselves up to a higher standard, not a bitter standard.

Ephesians 4:30: (NASB) <sup>30</sup>Do not grieve the holy spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Ephesians 4:31: (NLT) <sup>31</sup>Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior.

Perhaps the apostle is saying to get rid of bitterness first, since bitterness is the seed from which grows rage, anger, harsh words and slander.

And while *harsh words* (other translations say *loud or rude behavior*) can be a symptom, it does not appear in all cases. We can be bitter and no one would know it. We could have *asymptomatic* bitterness making us spiritually sick.

Ephesians 4:32: (NASB) <sup>32</sup>Instead, be kind to each other (instead of having rage), tenderhearted (instead of anger), forgiving one another (instead of harsh words), just as God through Christ has forgiven you (focus on the forgiveness factor instead of slandering others).

The apostle is showing us how to replace what bitterness brings into our lives, exposing what it does to an individual. It damages us silently and deeply.



**Learning to be Better, not Bitter:**

**BITTERNESS DOES NOT NEED BIG REASONS TO EXIST; RATHER, IT SIMPLY NEEDS A HEART THAT FEELS HURT OR BETRAYED OR FORGOTTEN OR MISUNDERSTOOD. OUR FIRST LEARNING STEP IS TO EXAMINE OUR OWN HEARTS FOR THESE SYMPTOMS.**

Bitterness with a small reason to exist is just as dangerous as bitterness with a large reason to exist. It is a busy characteristic, considering that it does not focus on calling attention to itself.

**Once we have begun to identify the bitterness in our own hearts, what are we supposed to do with it?**

Identification is an enormous first step, even though it may just seem like a reason to get upset with ourselves. Our next step is to realize that the most common ways our bitterness can be expressed is in words and actions. Here is where the work of overcoming bitterness really begins! Once we realize we may have it within, then we can ask ourselves what we will do about it.



We move on to the second point, where we have a more detailed warning about how bitterness is expressed.

Bitterness creates in us fountains of poison. Just like water from a well comes from a hidden source, our bitterness also comes from the hidden harboring of negative emotions.



The water in a well comes from deep underground - bitterness can come from deep inside of us, sometimes we do not even know where it comes from:

James 3:8-12: (NASB) <sup>8</sup>But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; <sup>10</sup>from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. <sup>11</sup>Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and **bitter <4089>** water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

We will produce what comes from within our hearts. If there are roots of the bitterness, they will show. They may come from deep inside, but they will eventually surface.



When the diagnosis is bitterness, what symptoms should we recognize? Are we expressing it in ways we did not realize?

Praise can be phony or genuine. We can give constructive criticism, or it can be harsh and unforgiving - bitter. Perhaps we are giving praise that is not heartfelt. Or, we are purposely withholding it when it should be warranted. On the other hand, if our criticism of others is harsh and biting, this may be symptoms of bitterness.



**Scriptural Focus James gives us a remedy:**

James 3:13: (NASB) *Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.*

Wisdom does not need a club, threats or power. It just needs to be expressed with clarity and righteousness. The *gentleness of wisdom* is a dramatic way to undo bitterness. We cannot have the *gentleness of wisdom* if there is a bitter issue warring within us.



**The remedy from James is based on the very foundation of Christian living:**  
**1 Corinthians 13:1: (NASB)** *If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

In other words, if I am saying the most eloquent words I could possibly find, but I do not have love, I am just a noisemaker drawing attention.

**Here is what love actually is:**

**1 Corinthians 13:4-7: (NASB)** *<sup>4</sup>Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, <sup>5</sup>does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, <sup>6</sup>does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; <sup>7</sup>bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Whenever I hear these scriptures, I'm usually at a wedding. It also reminds me that **Colossians 3:19** tells husbands not to be bitter towards their wives. So, special warning to the husbands out there!



There is nothing even remotely bitter in the passage above. This is the way to treat others. If we have a hard time using love when dealing with others, maybe there is bitterness standing in our way.

**James 3:14-15: (NASB)** *<sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. <sup>15</sup>This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.*

*Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition* are lies against the truth. Here is the challenge within us. We can be lying against the truth while we proclaim we stand for the truth. Too much bitterness makes us stuck in the lies, deception and hurt that caused the bitterness. We cannot move on, and God cannot use us to the extent He could if we were able to put that bitterness aside.



This one is tough. It is our natural inclination to root for the good guy and feel good, and even smug, when the bad guy gets what is coming to him. When we believe someone has wronged us, it can feel good to see them struggling and failing. *After all, they deserve it. What comes around goes around. I am vindicated.*

We feel bad, though, when that person is successful, or it looks like God is blessing them. *After what they did to me, why should they get away with it and be so happy?* This is bitterness.



We can feel bitterness because of people who have not even wronged us but are just succeeding when we are not.

***There is no disappointment so numbing...as someone no better than you achieving more. – Joseph Heller***

Bitterness can creep in when we do not even realize it. It hides in all kinds of jealousy.

### **Scriptural Focus Ananias, the disciple who baptized Saul of Tarsus:**

**Acts 9:17-19:** (NASB) *<sup>17</sup>So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the holy spirit. <sup>18</sup>And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; <sup>19</sup>and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus.*



Who is being bitter? There does not seem to be any bitterness here.

Ananias had every right to be bitter towards Saul, an enemy of Christians. His friend Stephen was stoned to death at Saul's word. Others were imprisoned by him. When someone we love has been unjustly hurt, we want to lash out. But that is not what Ananias did. He was welcoming to his new brother, Saul, and he celebrated his conversion to Christ. This is true love and obedience to God's will.

There is no bitterness here, despite there being every justification for it. Saul of Tarsus was a "bad guy" from the viewpoint of the early Christians. He had done serious damage. This was indisputably true. But, because Saul was converted and Ananias believed the words of Jesus, Ananias went to Saul with open arms. Without an ounce of bitterness, he proclaimed Saul as his brother.

Ananias did *better, not bitter* because he was spiritually mature. When Jesus appeared in the vision and told Ananias to go to Saul of Tarsus to minister unto him, he asked: *Lord, you mean this Saul of Tarsus?* Ananias took the assurance he was given and did what the Lord bid him to do. This is why he was the one chosen - how many of us could have done this with this kind of grace? Ananias harbored no bitterness once the Lord explained how he wanted to use Saul. He went and brought the man who would become the beloved Apostle Paul into Christianity.

**Bitter**  
**e**

**James 3:16:** (NASB) *For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.*

Behind *jealousy and selfish ambition* lays bitterness. All the jealous and selfish things we can feel about others rise because of it.



## DO I FREQUENTLY RESORT TO PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR?

The Mayo Clinic defines this as “...a pattern of indirectly expressing negative feelings instead of openly addressing them. There’s a disconnect between what a passive-aggressive person says and what they do.”

You might agree to do something for someone but then you show you are angry or resentful by not doing the task or purposely doing it wrong. Outwardly you say you will cooperate, but it is with a hostile attitude because inwardly you feel cheated or underappreciated.

If I say to my friend: “Oh, I love your new dress! I wish I had one but I’m too skinny for that style.” Or, “I wish I could afford a new car like yours. All my money goes to helping my grandparents.” “Wow, the way you eat, you’d think you were raised in a barn! Just kidding.” When someone calls them out on this, the passive-aggressive person might reply with: “Oh, you’re just too sensitive.” Kidding, not kidding. Sorry, not sorry. Sometimes we make a joke of this behavior so that we can stab somebody and laugh.

Bitterness takes our Christianity and sacrifices it for our humanity, our fleshly desires and glorification. Are we willing to give into this?

### Scriptural Focus James again gives us perspective:

James 3:17-18: (NASB) <sup>17</sup>But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup>And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

*The wisdom from above* is all these beautiful things, and eventually it becomes a peacemaking wisdom. The gentleness of wisdom is peacemaking. Bitterness does not know how to make peace; it breaks things into pieces. Jesus was a peacemaker. It is not enough to just have knowledge. Knowledge helps to understand things and put them in order, but wisdom applies them to real life.



Uncovering how true wisdom works and why it is so rare



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WHAT IS WISDOM?

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## The example of Jesus shines here above all others:

**Matthew 5:44-46:** (NASB) <sup>44</sup>*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*

If we are *to love our enemies*, this is the goal we will need to rise to. We will have to struggle to get to that point. This is what Jesus did and expects from us. He did not harbor bitterness towards anyone, even at the end of his life. Jesus died for those who lied against him, tormented him, and even crucified him. He died for every one of them without a shred of bitterness.



BITTERNESS IN ALL FORMS IS UGLY. TO SEE IT MANIFEST ITSELF IN OUR THOUGHTS, WORDS AND ACTIONS IS TO SEE OUR LIVES REFLECT THE DARKNESS OF THE DEVIL AND NOT THE LIGHT OF GOD. IS MY LIFE REFLECTING THE LOVE OF JESUS OR DEVILISH FRUSTRATION WHEN I INTERACT WITH OTHERS?

The good news here is that bitterness can not only be identified but can also be put in a position to be starved!

**Seeing bitterness take over ourselves is bad, but what about when it takes over those around us?**

Once bitterness has taken root in our hearts, it can easily poison our words. Now we become walking contradictions, speaking both blessing and cursing. We now are liable to pollute both our physical and spiritual environments with unspiritual and devilish attitudes. Rather than witnessing to the gospel, our lives witness against it.



Thinking of pure versus polluted water, we are all growing in a contaminated state, but we strive to keep our thoughts, words and actions pure. In the field of environmental risk, we measure certain contamination in drinking water in parts per billion (ppb).

For example, in the United States, you can have .01 micrograms per liter (0.01 mg/l) or 10 parts per billion (10 ppb) of arsenic in drinking water. Anything other than that tiny, tiny amount is considered too contaminated to drink. In many cases, it is impossible to have zero parts per billion of contamination.

It is the same with bitterness. The more contaminated we are by bitterness, the less spiritually healthy we are. It can negatively affect those around us. Our job is to identify any bitterness we have in order to figure out what it is we are bitter about. Then, starve it by changing what we do, say and think.



Even if we cannot get to the root of the bitterness right away, by changing those reactions and working backwards, we begin to starve it by not feeding it through our reactions.

Now we will look at a sad Old Testament example of the grip that bitterness holds from within:

Esau is an example of bitterness expressed in quiet and growing anger. Most of us can relate to this. The picture here is nurturing a root of bitterness that corrupts all around it. We saw how Esau sold his birthright, his inheritance as firstborn, for a bowl of stew. His own interpretation of this event was very different.

### Old Testament Blessings

An Old Testament blessing of a father to his sons included words of encouragement, details regarding each son's inheritance, and prophetic words concerning the future. For example, Isaac's blessing on Jacob (which was meant for Esau) gave him the earth's bounty and authority over his brother (Genesis 27:28-29). It also promised that those who blessed Jacob would be blessed, and those who cursed him would receive a curse—words that echo God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3.

[https://www.gotquestions.org/fathers\\_blessing.html](https://www.gotquestions.org/fathers_blessing.html)

**We drop into the account after Esau finds out that he lost his father's blessing as well:**

Genesis 27:34-36: (NASB) <sup>34</sup>When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father! <sup>35</sup>And he said, your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing. <sup>36</sup>Then he said, Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing. And he said, Have you not reserved a blessing for me?

Shouldn't Jacob, as his brother, have just graciously given Esau the bowl of food? He took advantage of Esau in a moment of hunger and weakness. Was that fair?

It does seem somewhat underhanded. However, Esau engaged in a legal transaction with Jacob: "Give me the food, and I will give you my birthright." When Esau says in verse 36 above, *He took away my birthright*, he was not telling the truth. In a court of law, Esau was the one who made the choice. Whatever wrong can be attributed to Jacob, Esau was NOT taking responsibility for making that legitimate trade. He was putting all the blame on Jacob, which was simply not true. This is how bitterness twisted it in his mind. Once the consequences of his actions were revealed and he came to realize just how much he gave up, Esau dove into living with bitterness.

***Bitterness can be corrosive. It can rewrite your memories as if it were scrubbing a crime scene clean, until in the end you only remember what suits you of its causes.* – Fredrik Backman**

This is exactly what happened with Esau. He only "remembered" that Jacob took it, rather than that he GAVE the birthright to Jacob. Circumstances were not great, of course, as Esau was at a vulnerable low, but *he made the choice*.

This lesson of the power of bitterness is a theme in the following teaching in the book of Hebrews. It builds upon having Jesus be our centerpiece, model and leader. It begins with our need to be subject to God's discipline so we can be receivers of God's grace.





**Hebrews 12:7-14:** (NAS) <sup>7</sup>*It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?* <sup>8</sup>*But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.* <sup>9</sup>*Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?* <sup>10</sup>*For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.* <sup>11</sup>*All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*

Discipline may not be *joyful* and happy, but it has a purpose. *It yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness* if we allow it to help us grow. To be open to God's discipline is to be in line for His grace. Bitterness naturally redirects the openness to discipline as it deflects blame. It is hard to let discipline work in our lives if we say: *It was not my fault; he took my birthright...* We cannot be properly disciplined if we do not accept the reality of our role in the experience. Bitterness gets in the way of this and keeps us from growing in Christ.

If we are treated unfairly and this is part of God's providence for us, bitterness could take us in the wrong direction. Instead of accepting the experience, we rail against it and are not properly exercised by it. If we have been treated unfairly, we still must stand up and accept our role in order to grow from it and through it. To let bitterness be the thing that rules us, like Esau did, takes us out of the grace of God and in the grip of bitterness.

<sup>12</sup>*Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, <sup>13</sup>and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*



When I read these verses, I take them personally and can see how the Lord in my life has metaphorically taken MY limbs out of joint to make me realize I'm going in the wrong direction. That's what a loving Father does. But I know we're looking at a bigger lesson here.

Hands that hang down and feeble knees sounds a lot like discouragement and being tired. We are more susceptible to bitterness when we are stressed out and burned out.

Focusing on the strengthening of the weak members of the body is an exercise that directly focuses us on being better and making others better! There is no room for bitter when we are focused on doing better.

We want to always be moving forward. The discipline of God helps us to grow and do this. If we relax into the knee-jerk reaction of bitterness, we do not use the discipline of the Father for its intended use. We are wasting God's time with us because we are not using and absorbing the lessons He is giving us.

**Do this and there will be no room for bitterness to grow:**

<sup>14</sup>*Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.*

We have to be sanctified, acting as someone who is "set apart for God's holy purpose" in every part of our lives. If we are actually living this role, we have no right to be bitter. God's purposes do not include bitterness.



We have to let it go. We cannot hold onto bitterness and be sanctified. The two do not work together; they are contrary to one another. We cannot let the bitterness overcome the sanctification, which can happen easily if we do not pay attention. Instead, we must work to make our sanctification overcome the bitterness.

For more on sanctification, see:



By trying to pursue peace whenever possible, we avoid any unnecessary contention that could lead to bitterness. This is true because we are not creating bitterness in our interactions but are trying to rise above those very human reactions. That is what Jesus did.



Bitterness obscures our ability to maintain good relationships. Every meaningful relationship has conflict at some point, and how we handle it either keeps that relationship alive or it falls away. A bitter person often leaves behind a trail of failed relationships. “Oh yeah, I used to be friends with that girl, but she was no good.” Or, “I do not talk to that family member anymore.” If everyone around us is no good, might we be the common denominator? If most of the people we are most close to are those we have only known a short time, bitterness might be a big and disturbing issue.

#### **Scriptural Focus All disciples are equal before God:**

**Romans 14:10-11:** (NASB) <sup>10</sup>*But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup>For it is written, as I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.*

All equal before God. Maybe a brother or sister in Christ hurt us, and maybe it was a legitimate hurt. Do we hold onto that hurt and harbor it, building our life around it, or do we look at them through this scripture that says, *why do you judge your brother?* He stands before God. If we are pursuing sanctification, we need to let go and let God take care of it. Otherwise, bitterness will sink our spirituality in its own self-serving wallowing.

**Hebrews 12:15-17:** (NASB) <sup>15</sup>*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; <sup>16</sup>that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup>For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.*



Bitterness here is associated with not appreciating the grace of God - that makes it a significant issue we need to deal with. If we are going against the grace of God, we are in a bad place.

There is a reason bitterness is likened to a root. It is well-established long before it shows itself. To the bitter person, the injustices of the past are just as fresh today as the day they occurred. The roots grow deeper and thicker. Do we remember the great blessings of our lives as vividly as we remember the hurts and difficulties? If the hurts and difficulties are more vivid, what is our thinking built upon? We need to rethink and relearn how to focus on the blessings.

### Scriptural Focus Be consumed with fervent love for one another:

**1 Peter 4:8-9:** (NASB) <sup>8</sup>Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup>Be hospitable to one another without complaint.

What an amazing lesson from Peter that love is above all. He learned from his mistakes, such as denying the Lord three times. Remember in John 21:15-17, Jesus asked him three times, *Do you love me?* Peter answered, *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.* Jesus said, *Feed my sheep.*

*Love covers a multitude of sins.*

Fervent love means love for one another should be active, burning and energized. To counteract bitterness - which is active, burning and energized, too - we have to use fervent love. Our love has to be on fire, otherwise it is just lip service that will not stomp out bitterness. Bitterness is too big, too deep, too buried to be rooted out by lukewarm love.



**Learning to be Better, not Bitter:**

**BITTERNESS LIKES DARKNESS, AND IT WILL FOCUS US ON AN "IT'S HIS FAULT" APPROACH TO OUR ISSUES. NOW OUR ANGER CAN SECRETLY AND MORE EASILY GROW WITHOUT INHIBITION WITHIN US. THIS BITTERNESS ROOT NOW HAS A STRONGHOLD IN OUR HEARTS AND WILL NATURALLY GROW TOWARDS DEFILING OTHERS. WE CANNOT POSSIBLY GROW IN CHRIST IF OUR HEARTS ARE GROWING IN BITTERNESS!**

Blaming everyone else gives us the right, the justification, to be angry. We give permission for bitterness to take root. And it might very well be their fault - but they are imperfect and struggling too. With Jesus, it really was "their" fault. He was misaligned, disrespected and in a trap at every turn. What did he do? He loved them enough to die for them. This is the "mic drop" moment - the ultimate example of not allowing bitterness to overcome our perspective. It is scary to think how deeply and firmly bitterness can be burrowed into our hearts. Only the grace of God can save us.

## Is it possible to have bitterness develop when you are not holding a grudge against anyone?

It seems odd to think about bitterness without thinking about a target for its reactions. Remember, the Bible defines it essentially as a poison when it comes to describing the human reaction. What this tells us is that we can have this poisonous reaction to our circumstances even if no one outside of our own thinking caused it. This makes bitterness an even bigger problem. We do not need to have a “bad guy” in our life. We can have bitterness, according to Scripture, without somebody having done something to us.



**We have come to our fourth and final point. Here we have a vivid New Testament example of the rotten poison that bitterness is.**

Simon the magician, who came to Christianity through Phillip, is a unique example of scriptural bitterness.

**As his story unfolds, we will see his bitterness is not actually directed TOWARDS anyone:**

**Acts 8:9-13:** (NASB) <sup>9</sup>Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; <sup>10</sup>and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, this man is what is called the Great Power of God. <sup>11</sup>And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

Simon was a showman who had people eating out of his hand. Life had been good for a long time. People were coming in droves to see the wonders he could perform.



**He was at the top of his game:**

<sup>12</sup>But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. <sup>13</sup>Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

Phillip showed up and performed *real* miracles of God and the *real* message of *real* salvation all due to the *real* man, Christ Jesus. Simon believed and is just as amazed by Phillip as the people had been of him, Simon. So far, we do not see any evidence of bitter roots growing in darkness. On the contrary, he was a believer! Wonderful! This is a great conversion - the end! Not quite...

**Peter arrived in town and laid his hands on some to give them the holy spirit. Simon makes a critical error in judgment:**

**Acts 8:18-24:** (NASB) <sup>18</sup>Now when Simon saw that the spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup>saying, Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the holy spirit.



Simon was a businessman at heart. He was very calculating in how he handled the crowd. He saw the actual miracles as astonishing, but he saw the bestowing of the holy spirit by which the miracles could occur, as a goldmine. He thinks of how great it would be if he had the power to give others the power to do miracles too! He could once again be called the *Great Power of God*.



### Is this bitterness? Yes, but not in the typical sense:

<sup>20</sup>But Peter said to him, may your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup>You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

This sounds like the Prosperity Gospel. It produces poison - taking what is sacred and pollutes it. Even one part per billion here is too much!

*You thought you could obtain the gift of God with money - Peter is saying: NO! Not here, not in Christianity. NO! It just does not belong.*

Peter reveals that the bitterness - the poison within Simon - has to do with his willingness to use a gift of God for profit.

### This is blatant sin, as that which is sacred should never be used for personal gain:

<sup>22</sup>Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, **the intention of your heart** may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup>For I see that you are in **the gall of bitterness** and in the bondage of iniquity.

Notice Peter called it *the intention of your heart*. Bitterness is a “sin of attitude” - an evil thought felt in the heart that needs forgiveness. This poison that was in the heart of Simon was not against an individual, but was a poison against God Almighty. It was taking the sacred gifts of God and using them for personal gain. It was the bitter taste of sin (iniquity) in Simon’s life.

### Let’s define the gall of bitterness:

(Source: Biblical Commentary by Albert Barnes) *In the gall*, this word denotes properly bile, or that bitter, yellowish-green fluid that is secreted in the liver. Hence it means anything very bitter; and also any bad passion of the mind, as anger, malice, etc.

*Of bitterness*, This is a Hebraism; the usual mode of expressing the superlative, and means excessive bitterness. The phrase is used respecting idolatry, Deuteronomy 29:18, “Lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood.” A similar expression occurs in Hebrews 12:15, “Lest any root of bitterness springing up, trouble you,” etc. Sin is thus represented as a bitter or poisonous thing; a thing not only unpleasant in its consequences, but ruinous in its character, as a poisonous plant would be in the midst of other plants...

When we look at bitterness from this perspective, it does not have to do with anybody else. It came from Simon’s own heart, his own self-serving way of living life. Because of that, Peter said Simon *has no part* in Christianity as Simon did not have a heart or mind geared to accepting Christ and becoming his follower. This was a serious accusation on Peter’s part.

Up until this admonition, Simon did not have feelings of bitterness, only of greed and personal ambition. He looked on the real miracles of the apostles as wonderful tricks with which to dazzle the people. He coveted the ability to not only do the miracles (which he might have been able to copy using illusion), but the ultimate power - to convey that power to others. His bitterness was not from feeling deprived, wronged by someone or jealous. He just wanted the recognition and power he could see the apostles had. He was shallow in his thoughts.

How did Simon have bitterness against God? The Bible says *the intention of his heart* was wrong. This is easy to see. He was avaricious and wanted power. How is this bitter? The *gall of bitterness* is an idiom meaning an excessive bitterness. Sin is ruinous like a root of bitterness. Peter says Simon is *in the bondage of iniquity*, a slave of his own sinful desires. That sinful side of him was a *gall of bitterness* - a terribly bitter (as in an acrid tasting) part of his character that influenced his heart and his intentions.





### Simon had a thoughtful and serious answer in return:

<sup>24</sup>But Simon answered and said, Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.

Simon was afraid. He saw the legitimacy of the miracles and the power of the holy spirit working through the apostles. He asked for prayers, realizing he was wrong and needed the help and prayers of the apostles.

Simon seems to have been taken by surprise. He did NOT understand the depth and seriousness of following Jesus. He believed in Jesus because he saw the glitz and glamor of the miracles done to bring those in the early church to a quick, full development, but he did not see the sacredness or belief of true Christianity. Too often we do not understand the sacredness of Christianity. This is a form of bitterness against God.

Simon had three negative characteristics:

1. He had too much self-confidence and very little “God-confidence.”
2. He had too much pride in his talent and no true awe of God and His gifts.
3. He was inevitably self-centered and not God-centered.

Simon saw what was happening in Christianity in those early days, thinking it was a wonderful opportunity for himself from a business standpoint. If he could get the power to transfer the holy spirit to others, it would make his previous “act” so much better. He would be in charge! He was lost in that self-centeredness.

Everyone is imperfect. We are not told what the final result was for Simon. Peter clearly stated what is acceptable before God and what is not.

To have the poison of personal gain and bitterness in our hearts when we come before God is not acceptable. How do we handle this? We need to drain away that poison, removing it and replacing it with goodness.



**Learning to be Better, not Bitter:**

FOR US, THE LESSON IS TO ALWAYS REALIZE THAT WHENEVER WE TAKE FOR GRANTED THE GRACE, PROVIDENCE AND SPIRIT OF GOD, WE ARE BEING BITTER TOWARDS HIM. WE ARE MAKING THE HEAVENLY POWER OF HIS PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES TO LOOK LIKE A COMMON TRICK OR ILLUSION – SOMETHING ENTERTAINING BUT OF NO LASTING VALUE.

When we take the grace, providence and spirit of God for granted, we are looking at like it is an illusion, a trick. This is a form of bitterness towards God. If we are not truly accepting the way God is directing our lives, we are misusing a great gift.

Bitterness permeates so many facets of our lives.





**It makes us realize we need to get ourselves out of the way and into a frame of thinking where we put God first:**

**1 Peter 5:6-7:** (NASB) *<sup>6</sup>Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, <sup>7</sup>casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.*

Bitterness exists in our lives. We are all imperfect and have it somewhere, somehow lurking beneath the surface. Do we feel like we need to dig and find it to be rid of it, or are we content to let it be there because it is not so bad? We need to root it out! We have just seen several scriptural examples to show us that with bitterness comes godlessness.



As we seek to root out bitterness, we become more and more godly. We each have a choice what to do every day. With bitterness, we must understand it and change what we do, say or think in order to rise above such things and honor God. We do this not only with our words, but with our thoughts and actions as well.

*So, am I too bitter to be better?  
For Jonathan, Rick, Julie and Christian Questions...  
Think about it...!*

All quoted scriptures are from the 1995 version of NASB unless otherwise indicated.



Join us next week for our podcast on January 17, 2022  
Ep. 1213: Is God Happy With My Attitude? (Part 1)

## Bonus Material and Study Questions

Several points to help us fight against bitterness:

### Find the true meaning of sanctification in your life:

1 Thessalonians 4:3-7: (NKJV) <sup>3</sup>For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup>that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, <sup>5</sup>not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; <sup>6</sup>that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. <sup>7</sup>For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.

### Dwell only in truth. It is not enough to merely abstain from lying; we must be sure to proactively speak the truth as well:

Psalms 119:29: (KJV) Remove from me the way of lying: and grant me Thy law graciously.

Proverbs 12:19: (KJV) The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment.

Proverbs 12:22: (KJV) Lying lips are abomination to the LORD: but they that deal truly are His delight.

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

### There is a solemn responsibility to being members of one body, a responsibility that really has no room for any root of bitterness to form:

1 Corinthians 12:12-18: (NKJV) <sup>12</sup>For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. <sup>13</sup>For by one spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one spirit. <sup>14</sup>For in fact the body is not one member but many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot should say, because I am not a hand, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? <sup>16</sup>And if the ear should say, because I am not an eye, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? <sup>18</sup>But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

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

2 Corinthians 8:10-12: (NKJV) <sup>10</sup>And 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; <sup>11</sup>but 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. <sup>12</sup>For 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) <sup>9</sup>Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup>Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; <sup>11</sup>not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; <sup>12</sup>rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; <sup>13</sup>distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

### The test of our words, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks:

James 4:11-12: (NRSV) <sup>11</sup>Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever 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. <sup>12</sup>There 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) <sup>22</sup>Now 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. <sup>23</sup>You 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) <sup>11</sup>Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. <sup>12</sup>For 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. <sup>13</sup>And 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. <sup>14</sup>Seeing 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. <sup>15</sup>For 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. <sup>16</sup>Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

**Philippians 4:7-8:** (NKJV) <sup>7</sup>and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, 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.

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# Study QUESTIONS

## Ep. 1212: Am I Too Bitter to Be Better?

<https://christianquestions.com/character/1212-bitterness/>

See:  CQ.Rewind  
SHOW NOTES

1. What are some things that cause bitterness? How can it affect our lives? What are the definitions of the words translated *bitter* and *bitterness* in the Bible? (Colossians 3:19, Acts 8:23, James 3:14)
2. How does bitterness rationalize sinful behavior? In what way does it skew our view of the world? How does anger play into this? What are some of the ways Paul gives us to combat bitterness? (Ephesians 4:21-32)
3. What are some of the common signs that might indicate we are expressing bitterness? What is our main tool in treating others that will help overcome bitterness in our hearts? (James 3:8-15, 1 Corinthians 13:1-7)
4. How do hurt, jealousy and selfish ambition generate bitterness? How does Ananias' example humble us and give us a pattern to follow in our lives? How does Jesus' example help us? (James 3:14-18, Acts 9:17-19, Matthew 5:44-46)
5. Why was Esau bitter? Did he have a right to be bitter? Explain. How did bitterness affect Esau's memory of the birthright incident? How can it affect our memories? What can we learn from Esau? (Genesis 27:34-36)
6. What is the end result of God's discipline? How does discipline accomplish this? What does bitterness do to derail the lessons of discipline? What tool does Hebrews 12:14 give us to avoid bitterness in our interactions? (Hebrews 12:7-14)
7. If we only have short-term relationships, what might this indicate? How should we handle the myriad hurts that come to us in our lives? Are we ever justified in being angry due to hurt? How did Jesus handle persecution? (Romans 14:10-11, Hebrews 12:15-17, 1 Peter 4:8-9)
8. How did Simon the magician's selfish ambition lead him astray? What did the Apostle Peter accuse him of? What did he miss as he observed the miracles the holy spirit working through the apostles? How could this happen to us? What is the best course of action to avoid this? (Acts 8:9-13, 18-24, 1 Peter 5:6-7)
9. Do you see any bitter behaviors in your life? What tool or course of action from the study will help you to overcome these behaviors?