

Bitterness and Resentment

By:

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Bitterness and Resentment: They often go together and are the result of unresolved anger. To be specific, bitterness is the product of intense animosity, characterized by sarcasm and ill will. Resentment is true displeasure expressed toward someone as the result from a wrong, an insult, or injury; either real, imagined, or unintentional.

The Bible does not forbid displeasure, but it sets up two controls. The first control is to keep anger clear of bitterness, spite, and hatred. The second is to check daily to see if you have handled your feelings biblically. There is an old Latin proverb: "He who goes angry to bed has the devil for a bedfellow." Of course, there are many irritations in life, but if not kept in check they can become prime opportunities for Satan to lead us into evil passion.

Professional counselors have revealed that a large percentage of those being counseled today are angry, bitter, and resentful. Bottled-up feelings eat away until some actually become emotionally crippled or physically ill. Their ability to function becomes impaired. They often have difficulty sleeping and their personal relationships can erode. Unfortunately, some become so obsessed with the urge to "get even" that they may kill someone. The individual who has deep-seeded unresolved anger is not a healthy person.

A classic case of the "grudge and get even" syndrome is found in the biblical account of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16). Cain was angry because his offering to God was not acceptable, but his brother's was. It really was not a matter between Cain and Abel at all, but between Cain and God. It was God who rejected his offering. But Cain became resentful and depressed. Instead of repenting and asking forgiveness of God, he turned on his brother.

Many times people will share problems of this nature because they are seeking sympathy or reinforcement. They will tell you how they have been misunderstood and mistreated, never realizing the sinful implications behind their

own behavior. Therefore, as the story unfolds and you detect resentment and bitterness, always treat it as sin.

Most Christians, rather easily, acknowledge there is more to their sinfulness than specific behaviors that violate clear standards. Of course we battle with "bigger" issues; selfish motives and the like. But the matter is sometimes left there, at a level of non-convicting generality.

Others resist a look at inner ugliness, preferring to think more about struggles than sinfulness. "I don't have enough self-confidence. I am just so insecure." "Why am I such a perfectionist? I worry too much, and it is driving me crazy." Problems like these generate sympathetic concern from others and an almost heroic self-pity in oneself. The exposure of sinfulness, on the other hand, provokes conviction. Strugglers feel noble, but sinners feel dirty.

Unfortunately, in far too many churches, a sincere concern to heal the damage in peoples' lives has led to quietly easing sin aside. The truth that hurting people need encouragement has sometimes focused our attention on their struggles in a way that weakens our understanding of their sinfulness. This sometimes leads to veering away from a "help the hurting" approach to that of some conservative Christians who put the spotlight back on sin. The modern tendency is to tone down the horrors of sin by explaining it away as psychologically caused. These believers, probably upset with this, often expose sin in its most obvious forms: adultery, laziness, shifting blame, lying, etc.

The point is well taken. Certainly we struggle as victims of other peoples' unkindness. We have been sinned against. But we cannot excuse our sinful responses to them on the grounds of their mistreatment of us. We are responsible for what we do. We are strugglers and sinners, victims and agents, people who hurt and people who harm.

Have you noticed what has happened? When we look inside, we tend to think of ourselves as strugglers with buried pain. But when we decide it is time to get serious about our responsibility to pursue God, we come back to the surface and work at doing all we should.

Sincere individuals who want to change are given two options: Find help as you honestly explore the pain in your heart, or assume responsibility for straightening out the sin in your behavior.

Now the problem in our heart is far worse than many suspect. When we look inside, we will bump into more than bad memories and painful feelings. An honest look will, in every case, eventually expose something terribly ugly – something I will call demandingness.

We are a demanding people. We are willing to forgo God's promises to supply all of our needs. This leaves us relying on our own efforts to survive. We limp along in our quest to find that happy ending so we can enjoy things and circumstances without any consequences that may follow. We also look to fulfill these desires without any blessings from God. The only problem with that "solution" is that we will eventually fail in all aspects of our life if God is not placed at the center of our lives. What we'll find in this quest is that what we perceived as making us happy and satisfied without God will, in fact, only lead to misery.

When we assume responsibility for what we desperately require but cannot control, we irrationally demand that our efforts succeed. The spirit of demandingness must be identified, recognized in all its ugliness, and abandoned through repentance. Think with me about your specific issue from three angles:

- How does God view the problem?
- How has the problem developed?
- What would God do to resolve it?

What does God say on this issue of bitterness or demandingness? In

Colossians 3:8-10 Paul was inspired to write:

But now you also, put them all aside; anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.

When God arranges things, sometimes it seems uniquely designed to frustrate us: A tire goes flat on the way to an important meeting; a friend, perhaps, lets you down during a time when you needed them the most; you developed laryngitis the morning of your presentation. In times of frustration, our High Priest sometimes seems more distant to our needs. We pray asking God to hear our cry, pleading with Him to let nothing else go wrong. I have wondered sometimes if our prayers reflect more of a demand than a petition. Frustration is excellent soil for growing a demanding spirit.

It is therefore important that we handle difficulties well, allowing them to mature us rather than to push us towards demandingness.

Hebrews 12:14-15

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

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.

Each of us has been a victim of someone else's sinfulness. We have been mistreated. It is unfair. But when the hurt caused by others drives us not to trust God but rather demand relief – then God's failure to cooperate with our demands makes Him seem less a concerned friend and more like a cruel enemy.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we have definite plans, which we believe shall achieve our happiness. Those plans are rooted in ways of thinking about life and are inherently imbedded in whom we are. We don't challenge or question them. We do, however, measure someone's love by their degree of concern and cooperation with our plans. Therefore, God's refusal to help us pursue our goals makes Him seem unconcerned about our happiness. The heavens turn into ceiling, above which our prayers never rise. Our minds invent an image of a God who doesn't care and only becomes annoyed by our prayers.

When difficult problems grow worse it is tempting to give up on God. When the ultimate source of power refuses to take up our just cause, then whatever is required to find relief seems warranted and justified. Remember, unrelenting struggles tend to blur our thinking. Things that are clearly wrong become less offensive to our conscience when they appear to provide our only hope for relief.

You see, we are so deeply committed to our own well being that anyone who blocks our path to the joy we desire becomes the object of our wrath while we suffer with our grief. "How can He treat me like this? It is wrong. I will just have to press on even though I hurt."

That isn't how God desires us to react. Our Lord instructs us to love others as we love ourselves, to be as concerned with someone else's well being as we are with our own. This command is staggering; it is not optional. The more I begin to understand what love requires, the more I realize how poorly I love and the more awed I am by Christ's love for me.

God really expects me to focus on my response to others, measuring it by the standard of divine love, even if the one I am attempting to love is failing me.

Who is in a position to legislate what is right or wrong? No level of suffering justifies us in deciding how we should be treated. Nor can the discomfort be so

severe that sinful strategies for finding relief become acceptable. No matter how much relief of intolerable pain self-protection might provide, we can never violate love without sinning.

Romans 12:14-19

Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

Never take on your revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

This love is the circulatory system of the Body of Christ, which enables all the members to function in a healthy, harmonious way. This must be an honest love, not a hypocritical love. It is humble, not proud. "Preferring one another" means treating others as more important than ourselves. Paul was admonishing his readers to maintain their spiritual zeal because they were serving the Lord not men. Proud people demand. They assume they have that right. But God set the record straight. There is no one whose high estimate of himself qualifies him to tell God what to do. And that final point emphasizes a central principle of living in God's world. The necessary foundation for our relationship with God is recognition that God is God and we are not.

TO SUMMARIZE:

Bitterness is unresolved anger or ill will held by someone, either internally or expressed in an outward manner toward others. Bitterness, if left unresolved, not only leads to a broken fellowship with our Lord, it can also manifest itself in a myriad of negative outcomes that affect us emotionally, mentally, and physically. Bitterness eats away at our very being; it alters our sense of stability, and it only takes up residence inside us when we allow it.

Resentment, also the result of unresolved anger, is achieved through the real or perceived wrong that we believe was committed against us by someone else. Resentment, if left unresolved over time, will lead to Bitterness. Both of these outcomes are usually expressed outwardly against those around us, especially the ones we love the most.

The good news is this: we do know the “cure” for these two maladies (best known as sins). The cure is twofold: 1) we need to confess to God that we’re sinners; 2) we need to acknowledge that He, through His Son’s death on the Cross and resurrection, is the only One who can free us from our entrapment to these and all sins. When we’ve taken those two initial steps we’ll be on the road to healing that we’ve not experienced before. Engaging in a daily walk of prayer and Bible study will not only empower us to turn away from Bitterness and Resentment, it will be an outcome that is most welcomed by those whom we love the most.

We, therefore, have no right demanding anything of anyone, no matter how fervently our soul longs for relief from pain. It is wrong to internally demand that your loved one becomes a Christian, or your spouse stop drinking, or your rebellious child straightens up. Desire much, pray for much, but demand nothing. To trust God means to demand nothing.