

Bitterness: Part One

By Wendy Wood



Bitterness is an attitude of the heart that is becoming more and more frequent in the counseling room. Bitterness affects every aspect of life and is truly dangerous to the spiritual health of people. Bitterness is rooted in pride. Bitterness is grounded in thoughts like, “that shouldn’t have happened to me” or “I don’t deserve that treatment” or “that person doesn’t deserve my forgiveness”. Self is the center of these thoughts. All of these thoughts are really a judgment on God’s providence in our lives. Bitterness comes when we are resentful that difficult circumstances or people have made our life difficult and we don’t choose to trust God that He really is good, loving, and wise in working His plan for our lives out.

So let’s look at the progression of becoming bitter so that we can see how to help someone uproot bitterness from their heart. This first post will deal with how bitterness grows, and part two will address how to help a counselee repent and uproot bitterness from their heart.

Bitterness starts with a hurt. The hurt may be a loss of a job or a loved one dying, a situation that causes pain. The hurt may be a friend betraying you or a boss who belittles you. These hurts are caused by being sinned against. Bitterness begins to grow when the hurt that has occurred is not seen as God's purpose in your life to make you more like Christ. Rather than surrendering to God's plan in the hurt, the person dwells on the hurt, rehearses the event or situation over and over in their mind, and thinks that "if only" this hadn't happened, life would be good. The painful event becomes the focus of their thoughts rather than fixing their eyes on Christ and choosing to see suffering from God's perspective. Hebrews 12:15 warns against bitterness and Ephesians 4:31 tells us to get rid of bitterness. Bitterness is the choice to not forgive a sinner and to not trust God in difficult circumstances.

As the root of bitterness takes hold, typically the bitter person starts to get angry. It may start "small" at first. They may make negative comments about people and life circumstances. They may internally get frustrated more easily as others sin against them. Anger grows, however. With bitterness residing in the heart, anger becomes a lifestyle. Small hurts are responded to with an out-of-proportion response of frustration. Bitterness grows from a mental framework to outward expressions of impatience and self-righteousness. James 1:19-20 tells us that man's anger does not bring about the righteousness of God. Anger over our circumstances, whether sinned against or just situations that happen from living in a sin-cursed world, reveals that we are playing judge in God's place and not trusting His perfect plan.

From an angry lifestyle a bitter person becomes stubborn. Picture the Israelites wandering the desert. The Israelites didn't like their circumstances. They were unsatisfied with their food, drink, leaders, and living situation. In Numbers 11 as they grumble and complain, God calls them "stiff-necked" people. They don't see any good around them despite the fact that God's presence is visible in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire. They are not thankful for the food that God provides daily for them. They are stubbornly choosing to focus on what doesn't feel good to them and they fail to

see God at work. A bitter person becomes stubborn in their thinking similarly to the Israelites. The bitter person will think or say “he’ll ALWAYS be like that” or “she will NEVER change”. Psalm 81:11-12 says, “But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own counsel.” This is dangerous territory to be in. A stubborn mindset is neglecting God and choosing to be ungrateful. Romans 1 tells us that those who are ungrateful to God are on their way to rebellion, and that is the next step for bitter people.

In rebellion, a bitter person thinks, “God’s way hasn’t worked out for me. I’m going to do it my way.” Rebellion comes from a hardened heart that has refused God’s goodness in hard times and in being sinned against. Rebellion is rooted in the thinking that “my way is better than God’s way”. It may be that the bitter person chooses to have sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend because God hasn’t provided a spouse for them so they will try to accomplish “marriage” their own way. It may be that a spouse stops asking for forgiveness because their spouse doesn’t repent, and the bitter person thinks that being humble isn’t working. It could be an employee who isn’t being recognized for their work so they stop working as hard because they think ‘what’s the point?’. “No one else works hard and they get the same pay.” Rebellion is trusting in self rather than God. Hebrews 3:7-12 warns, “Do not harden your heart.. Where your fathers put me to the test...They always go astray in their heart... they shall not enter my rest”. The Israelites are again the example of bitterness turning to rebellion. They did not enter God’s rest because they rebelled against him.

This rebellion started with unforgiveness and a lack of trust in God’s goodness in suffering. To look back at this all beginning with hurt that wasn’t dealt with biblically is eye opening to the danger of unforgiveness and judging God’s providence in our lives. This counselee needs help to see God accurately, to understand the amazing gift of forgiveness that they have received from God, understanding suffering from God’s perspective, and the danger of pride in the heart. Repentance is the only way out of bitterness. We’ll examine that in the next blog.