

Anger and Bitterness¹

Adapted from
Pursuing Peace by Robert D Jones

1) What is *bitterness*?

That inner anger lodged deep in the heart, sometimes known only to the bitter person and God. Bitterness is settled anger, the kind that not merely reacts to someone's offense, but forms a more general and global animosity against the offender himself...We store the hurt in our heart, nurture it, and let it grow to the point where we look with hostility at the offender.²

2) What is the difference between being angry at someone for what they did and being bitter?

Anger responds to an incident. "I'm angry about what you did." Bitterness goes deeper to form an attitude – a settled stance or posture—against the perpetrator: I'm bitter at you, because you are an evil person." The incident that prompts anger can become secondary to the bitter attitude.³

3) Toward whom do you harbor unforgiveness, bitterness and/or resentment?

4) What has the person(s) you listed in Question #3 above done that has hurt you so deeply that you struggle to forgive?

¹ Adapted by Nanette Loveless from Robert D Jones, *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

² Jones, 138.

³ Jones 138.

“How can I get rid of my bitterness?”⁴

In his book *Pursuing Peace*, Robert Jones lists six gospel truths that can prevent resentment from building. These truths are listed below along with the references for several Scripture passages. Review the six truths below, one at a time, slowly, thoughtfully and prayerfully. For the next six days, reflect on these truths one at a time. Highlight anything that stands out to you as you read the descriptions of each truth. Keep a journal where you record your reflections, your memory verses and your prayers. It will also be helpful to paraphrase or summarize each Bible passage listed so you can go back and review your journal and remember the message of each passage on which you have reflected.

On the first day,

- 1) Read the first truth.
- 2) Look up the Bible passages referenced.
- 3) Paraphrase or summarize each passage in your journal.
- 4) Reflect on the message of each passage: “How does it apply to you?”
- 5) Pick a verse to memorize and to meditate on. Write the verse on a note card. To meditate on a verse means to mull over and over in your mind ways that you can apply the verse. Meditation is the bridge between *knowing* and *doing* God’s Word.
- 6) Then write a prayer to the Lord based on that truth—a prayer that honestly confesses your resentment before him and thoughtfully seeks to apply the Bible to your battle.

On the next day, repeat the same procedure for the next gospel truth. Continue to do the same each day, one truth per day. After six days, repeat the same six-day cycle, reviewing the same passages and memory verses, **but writing new prayers.** As you locate each Scripture passage, take your time and **ask God to “open your eyes to see His wonderful truths.”**

This assignment will require twelve days, since you are asked to review one truth per day and then to repeat the process.

Gospel Truths:

1. *The Enormity of God’s Love Displayed in the Cross.*⁵ If we become bitter we will have forgotten the massive size of the sin debt that God forgave us.

- Matthew 18:21-35
- Matthew 22:37-39
- Psalm 103:12
- Micah 7:19
- Isaiah 1:18

After reading Matthew 18:21-35: Currency conversion estimates for ten thousand “talents” (coins) range from twelve million to a billion dollars today – in other words, an unpayable sum. Jesus uses a deliberate exaggeration to make his point. The first servant bore an impossible debt. How much was the second servant’s debt? Scholars tell us that one denarius was the daily wage for a common day laborer. One hundred denarii would equal one hundred days of pay, or approximately one-third of an annual salary. If we think of \$18,000 as a low annual wage, then a hundred days would mean \$6,000.

⁴ Jones, 150.

⁵ Jones, 139-142.

Maybe we simply forget the piercing truth emerging from our Lord's story: No one has ever sinned against you as much as you have sinned against God. If you dwell on your offender's \$6,000 debt against you, you will be trapped in bitterness until you die. But if you dwell on God's forgiveness of your multimillion-dollar debt, you will find release and liberty. Being kind, compassionate, and forgiving will remain burdensome for anyone who minimizes the thrilling force of the full pardon Jesus gives.

2. *Our Desperate Need for God's Forgiveness.*⁶ If we become bitter and unforgiving, we will be declaring that we do not need God's forgiveness in our lives.

- Mark 11:25
- Matthew 6:12, 14-15
- Romans 3:23, 6:16-18, 23

3. *Our Ultimate Need for God's Mercy.*⁷ Our God is a God of matchless mercy, one who delights in showing grace even to those who offend him deeply. His forgiving mercies extend from east to west (Ps. 103:12). He mercifully saves us despite our unrighteous deeds. His mercies are new every morning (Lam 3:23). But if we become bitter, we will be declaring that we do not need God's mercy. This third reason parallels the second We need forgiveness, and we also need mercy.

How might you answer this simple question: On the day of final judgment, do you want to face God with mercy, or without mercy? The point is obvious: We all want almighty God to treat us mercifully. We don't want to stand before him on our own merits.

- James 2:13
- Micah 6:8
- Luke 6:36
- Matthew 5:7

Mercy always marks the godly person. The godly person loves mercy. He is a merciful person, like God his Father. Mercy toward our enemies is Godlike, coming down from heaven, bringing blessing both to those we forgive and to us who extend it.

4. *God's Role and Ours.*⁸ If we become bitter, we will be assuming God's role as Judge and Avenger. What role do we play when we remain bitter against someone? We are functioning as a judge. We assess the evidence against someone, render a verdict, and declare him guilty. Bitter people grab the throne of the one Lawgiver and Judge.

Most people know revenge is wrong; fewer people understand why. The reason is not because evil acts do not warrant justice. They do. But it is God's job, not ours. We must "leave room for God's wrath." We must trust God to be God, to let God be angry for us. Don't avenge; trust the righteous Avenger to bring justice in his time and in his way.

- James 4:12
- Romans 12:19, 14:9-10

⁶ Jones, 142-143.

⁷ Jones, 143-144.

⁸ Jones, 144-146.

5. *The Dual Nature of the Offender's Sin.*⁹ If we become bitter, we will forget that as a sinner the offender is deceived and enslaved by his sin. How do you look at the person who offended you?

- Romans 3:10-12
- 1 John 3:4
- John 8:34
- 2 Peter 2:19
- Proverbs 5:22
- Luke 23:34
- 1 Corinthians 2:8
- Isaiah 53:6

The Bible brings a balancing perspective. People who sin against us are not only rebels and lawbreakers; they are also deceived and enslaved. Sin enslaves. It deceives. It blinds. Nowhere does this truth appear more strikingly than at the cross when Jesus pleads for his perpetrators, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Amazing! Jesus views his crucifiers as self-deceived and ignorant, and he mercifully prays for their forgiveness...A Christ-like perspective on your offender includes recognizing that person's slavery and self-deception. It means not taking that person's sin against you too personally.

One of the spectacular, Godlike turning points for someone who has been hurt comes when she begins to feel a surprising measure of Christ-like compassion for her offender. She sees how her offender has blindly followed his own way. She learns not to take his sin too personally, and to see his sin as chiefly not against her but against God. She realizes that the other person's sin and her own multimillion-dollar debt both arise from the same selfish root: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray..."

To forgive our offender does not mean to condone our offender's sin. Our forgiveness does not imply that we are in agreement with his rationale. Instead, our forgiveness recognizes that our offender is blind and self-deceived, an out-of-control, shepherdless person who desperately needs Jesus. Our anger can turn to pity, as we pray for our offender and ask God to rescue him from himself.

6. *Our Own Fallibility.*¹⁰ If we become bitter, we will be forgetting that as sinners we too are capable of the same sins, and that the same root sins may already reside in us. Apart from sheer grace we are no better than our offenders. In our resentment against others we forget that our own hearts are "deceitful above all things and beyond cure."

- Jeremiah 17:9
- Hebrews 3:12-13
- Proverbs 16:18
- 1 Corinthians 10:12

Bitterness is a step toward self-destruction. Unchecked, it will destroy you. Even professing Christians are not immune to the dangers of a deceitful heart that overlooks its own sin and judges others.

⁹ Jones, 146-148.

¹⁰ Jones, 148-150.

What does this danger look like? It begins with sentiments like these: “I would never do to someone else what he did to me!” “I can’t believe he did that; I would never do that!” When we say or think things like that, surely the Lord winces. Are we really so sure that we couldn’t do the same thing? How confident should we be that we would never commit any specific sin? Given the same background and life models, how can we know with such certainty that we would never do the same thing that the offender did to us? How do we really know that, given the same circumstances and environment, and the same temptations and provocations, we would not commit the same hurtful act?

In our bitterness we naively pretend moral superiority and invulnerability. Few have captured this concept more famously than the English Reformation pastor and martyr, John Bradford (1510-1555). From his prison cell in the tower of London he saw a criminal being led to execution for his crimes. Bradford’s words are humbling: “There but for the grace of God, go I.” Using the gospel to battle bitterness means that, apart from God’s grace, we are not better than the person who has sinned against us.

6) Which of the six truths above is most helpful for you? Explain.

7) Which truth seems the most difficult to apply? Explain.

Continue to repeat the above process until you begin to gain victory over your bitterness and resentment.