

L 10 ... Beating Bitterness

[Luke 15:25-32](#)

Have you ever been treated unfairly by someone? We all have, and our natural reaction is to become bitter. When we become bitter, we get off the path of kingdom living. Then, the “thorn” of a past offense festers when we refuse to let Christ help us remove it.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the older brother has a problem with the sin of bitterness. Bitterness is strong feelings of hatred, anger, cynicism, and resentment toward someone because of a real or imagined wrong. In this parable, Jesus reveals **three** requirements for **beating bitterness**.

Analyze the Cause (15:25-28a)

In our last lesson, the prodigal son has just returned home and is being joyfully welcomed by his loving father ([15:20-24](#)). Now, the older brother is returning from the field. As he nears the house and hears music and dancing, he asks one of the servants what is happening. He learns his younger brother has come home and his father is celebrating ([15:25-27](#)).

The older brother cannot believe his ears. He is the one who has remained home working in the fields and being faithful to his father. On the other hand, the despicable younger brother has caused his father untold worry, pain, grief, and even shame by squandering his inheritance with prostitutes ([15:30](#)).

Therefore, how does the older brother respond ([15:28a](#))?

Bitterness is caused by anger. There are three causes of anger: hurt, frustration, and fear (fear someone will take someone or something from you). All three are involved in the older son’s anger. He is frustrated because his faithfulness to his father seems to be unrewarded. He is also hurt and fearful the younger brother will take his place with his father.

What command does God give in [Psalm 37:8](#)?

The word translated **fret** (**ḥārâ, har-raw´**) means burning anger. Bitterness always originates with anger. Therefore, **analyze the cause** and...

Realize the Consequences (15:28b-30)

The father comes out and pleads with his older son to join the celebration ([15:28b](#)). However, the son replies: *Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends* ([15:29](#)). Bitter people, like the older brother, are always filled with pride and arrogance about their own goodness.

What does God say in [Proverbs 8:13b](#)?

Because of his pride and arrogance, the older son can see all kinds of wrong in his younger brother and in his father. Therefore, he says to his father: *But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf* ([15:30](#)).

The older brother's bitterness is also seen in the fact he says *this thy son* rather than "my brother" ([15:30](#)). Bitterness always spreads because a bitter person is never bitter toward just one person but also toward anyone who is nice to that person. Therefore, the older son is now bitter toward his father. He is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his father rather than accept his father's love for his younger brother.

There are at least **three** consequences of bitterness.

1. Bitterness robs us of joy. The older brother has no joy in his work or in knowing all his father has left will be his. This is significant because according to Jewish law and tradition, the oldest son would receive twice the inheritance of the younger. Also, the older son would not have to live with the memories of all the sins and hurts of his younger brother. However, his bitterness has robbed him of the joy of all his blessings. The older brother is a wonderful example of this truth: "It is a simple but forgotten truth that the greatest enemy to present joy and high hopes is the cultivation of retrospective bitterness" (Robert G. Menzies).

2. Bitterness causes us to self-destruct. Saul, the first king of Israel, is an excellent example of this. He has everything going for him—good looks, popularity, talent, success, and power. But after the shepherd boy David slays the giant and returns home, the Israelites praise him by singing, *Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands* ([1 Sam. 18:7b](#)).

How does Saul respond ([18:8a](#))?

Saul's anger then turns into bitterness and eats him up. "Bitterness is like cancer. It eats up the host." (Maya Angelou). Saul's bitterness causes him to try to kill David on several occasions. Bitterness muddles Saul's thinking both militarily and spiritually.

Finally, the Philistines (the arch enemy of Israel) defeat the Israelites in battle. They kill three of Saul's sons, including Jonathan—a wonderful person and David's dear friend. As a result, Saul asks his armor-bearer to kill him.

According to the last phrase of [1 Samuel 31:4](#), when his armor-bearer refuses, what does Saul do?

The Philistines didn't cause Saul's death; it was his own bitterness that caused him to self-destruct.

3. Bitterness alienates us from God. Rather than get rid of his bitterness, the older brother is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his father. That's exactly what we do when we harbor bitterness in our hearts. In [Ephesians 4:31](#), we read: *Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.*

When you see a list in the Bible, always pay special attention to what is first. *Bitterness* is listed first in that verse because all the other sins are results of *bitterness*. *Bitterness* is a horrible sin because it has so many sinful tentacles. *Bitterness* is sin, or iniquity.

Therefore, we should remember what fact in [Psalm 66:18](#)?

To beat bitterness, **analyze the cause, realize the consequences**, and...

Utilize the Cure (15:31-32)

The father, who is the main character in this parable, reminds the older brother of **three** things that reveal the secrets for **beating bitterness**.

1. Remember who you are. The father reminds the son, *Son, thou art ever with me* ([15:31b](#)). The father reminds the bitter, older brother that he is still his *son* and always will be. When we are tempted to become bitter, we need to remember who we are. We are the children of God, and we should act like it. We are to *be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation* ([Philip 2:15a-c](#)).

Why, according to the last phrase of that verse?

Remembering who you are helps you realize there is no excuse for bitterness toward anyone.

2. Focus on God's faithfulness. Don't forget God will give you what you deserve. While the prodigal son has been restored with a homecoming party, the fact remains he has *wasted* his inheritance ([15:13](#)). He will receive nothing that belongs to his older brother.

Therefore, what does the father, who represents God, say to the bitter brother ([15:31c](#))?

When we see people we think are undeserving succeed or be praised, we sometimes feel cheated and become bitter. However, if we live according to God's will, we will get our just reward, because of God's faithfulness.

3. Do the right thing. The father says to his older son, *It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found* ([15:32](#)). The father will not cancel the party because it's the right thing to do. The younger brother's rebellion and sin brought him to ruin. He will receive no more inheritance. When his father dies, he will probably end up working for his older brother.

The older brother needs to realize his life has been and will continue to be much better than his poor, disgraced brother. This one-day celebration will not change that. The celebration is the right thing to do, for it is truly a time of joy for the father and his family.

To utilize the cure for bitterness, **remember who you are, focus on God's faithfulness, and do the right thing.**

This parable has no ending. Jesus doesn't tell us whether or not the older brother comes into the celebration. Jesus leaves that decision up to you. Will you come into the Father's fellowship, or will you stay in the field of bitterness?

Before answering, remember [Psalm 84:10a](#). Write it below:

The psalmist continues: *I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents [palaces] of wickedness* ([Psa. 84:10b](#)).

To beat bitterness,

ANALYZE THE CAUSE,

REALIZE THE CONSEQUENCES, AND

UTILIZE THE CURE.