

Overcoming a root of bitterness

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HAWKINS, Texas—American author Stephen Crane once wrote an enigmatic poem that seemed to symbolize the dubious "joys" or self-reinforcing qualities of bitterness, resentment or self-pity:

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said: "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter-bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."

According to psychologist and motivational specialist Mark Ivar Myhre in his Dec. 27, 2004, article *How to Handle Self-Pity*: "Self-pity ranks as the absolute grandfather of all negative emotions. The positive side of pity lies with its powers of anesthesia. Self-pity numbs the pain. In fact, I believe self-pity to be the single most addictive 'thing' in the world."

Former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare John William Gardner claimed that "self-pity is easily the most destructive of the non-pharmaceutical narcotics; it is addictive, gives momentary pleasure and separates the victim from reality."

Centuries before Myhre's or Gardner's observations on the addictive qualities of self-pity, resentment, and bitterness, the apostles Paul and Peter were also warning against its druglike enslaving qualities, stifling the very ability to repent:

Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears [Hebrews 12:15-17].

You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity [Acts 8:21-23].

In both Esau's and Simon the Sorcerer's cases, they experienced a kind of paralysis in the ability to repent, turn around or change. Simon, even in his feigned attempt at "change," put the responsibility on others as he asked Peter to pray for him. The resentment was deeply buried into their inner beings like a many-tentacled root. The first recorded human to have harbored a root of bitterness was Cain, becoming envious of God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice:

And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the first-born of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it" [Genesis 4:3-7].

Even though God gave Cain ample opportunity to change his attitude, he preferred to lick his wounds, nurse his grudges and place a chip on his shoulder. As he wasted precious time harboring resentment, he became paralyzed to change and repentance.

Sometimes our taste buds crave bitter libations such as stout ale (flavored with hops and bitters) or dry wines such as burgundy or merlot. I remember, at the age of 10, raiding my mother's kitchen pantry, wolfing down bars of Baker's unsweetened-chocolate bars designed for baking rather than candy. Likewise, I enjoyed the flavor of chokecherries, a wild fruit that grew abundantly on our family farm in southern Minnesota. The chokecherry, like the pomegranate, has an initially sweet flavor but becomes progressively bitter as it slides across the taste buds.

Our auditory nerves can crave bittersweet music such as Brahms' German Requiem or Gelbrun's lament for the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto. The popularity of Tchaikovsky's "Only the Sad of Heart," as well as the lyrical ballad "The Last Rose of Summer," stems from its bittersweet impressions on our auditory nerves. Likewise, the weekly cantorial services in the synagogue, the Negro spirituals performed at revival meetings and the blues performed in bars on Bourbon Street attest to the insatiable craving for sad music. When David coaxed Saul out of his deep melancholy, it was not with knee-slapping ballads but with melancholy, dirgelike melodies that corresponded to Saul's isomodic depressed state.

Bitterness invariably accompanies the mangling of pride and the bruising of human ego. Again, instead of moving beyond the problem and attempting to solve it, human nature perversely savors the bittersweet flavor of self-pity, languishing in its victimhood. Theodore Dalrymple in a March-April 1995

Psychology Today article, "The Uses of Resentment," describes the bizarre reinforcing mechanism embedded in chronic victimhood:

There is a kind of sour pleasure or even a bitter happiness in such resentment, whatever the object it happens to attach itself to. With many people it becomes almost a vocation or a way of life. They revolve the injustices from which they believe they have suffered around in their heads almost like a mantra. They find the repetition reassuring: for something that is untrue attains an aura of truth if it is repeated often enough.

Dalrymple marvels that hardened criminals apparently have the greatest capacity for resentment, having "paper-thin skin" regarding any hurt they receive from others, but "elephant-thick hides" regarding injuries they have afflicted upon others. Perhaps no groups of individuals are more hate-filled, harboring greater resentment or bitterness than the descendants of Ishmael, Esau, Amalek, Moab and Ammon. The Angel of the Lord's prophetic description of Ishmael uses the derogatory term "wild ass of a man."

And he [Ishmael] will be as a wild ass among men; his hand will be against every man and every man's hand against him, and he will live to the east and on the borders of all his kinsmen [Genesis 16:12, Amplified Bible].

The horrific behaviors of radical Islam, strapping bombs to young children, steering aircraft into skyscrapers with the purpose of killing thousands of innocent people and barbarically beheading people in the name of Allah, carries all the earmarks of the evil confederation described in Psalm 83, craftily ambushing a hated sibling who received the greater blessing. The Bible's characterization of Ishmael, Esau, Amalek, Moab and Ammon fits the national traits of present-day, anti-Western Arab peoples. As Amos begins to pronounce the judgments on Israel's enemies, he seems to focus in on the despicable trait of harboring grudges in perpetuity:

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Moab [descendants of Lot] and for four [for multiplied delinquencies], I will not reverse the punishment of it or revoke My word concerning it, because he burned the bones of the king of Edom [Esau's descendant] into lime [Amos 2:1].

Nando Pelusi, in his article "Injustice Collecting," appearing in the November-December 2006 issue of Psychology Today, suggested that there are immense emotional payoffs we receive when we tenaciously hold onto grudges:

Injustice collecting allows us to avoid responsibility for our circumstances. Self-pity keeps us from letting go of unchangeable wounds, and garners attention and sympathy from others.

Injustice collecting, resentment and self-pity seem to be the lubricant of political affairs.

Political parties, for example, invest in bitterness as a game plan, creating class envy, race envy and gender envy, pitting poor against rich, black against white, and women against men, creating hostile enclaves of hatred.

The despicable lyrics of gangsta rap and certain kinds of hip-hop, as performed by groups such as 50Cent and Ludacris, are rooted in hatred, resentment and self-pity. Unlike the cathartic effects of spirituals or the blues, these forms of "art," replete with N-words, F-words, B-words and H-words, do very little to promote healing, build bridges or foster wholesome relationships. The output of these angry young people seems the antithesis of Jesus Christ's "love thy neighbor" theme.

Bitterness, hatred, resentment and self-pity, while highly addictive, do nothing to promote spiritual growth and maturity but actually are a major retardant to spirituality and a fast track to the unpardonable sin and the lake of fire.

The apostle Paul delineates two kinds of sorrow: godly and worldly.

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death [2 Corinthians 7:9-10].

Godly sorrow is productive, motivating us to change. The right kind of sorrow should motivate us to want to solve our problems, turning our lives around in true repentance, truly changing our lives. The regressive effects of worldly sorrow remind me of a camping trip my boys and I made back in 1982 coming back from Grandpa's farm. We had driven from Boulder, Colo., on the way to Moab, Utah, and the Arches. When we came to the little town of Cisco, Utah, a small pile of debris, broken glass, wire, asphalt, cement blocks, roofing material was right in the middle of the road. Next to the pile someone had constructed a sign that read HAZARD. I marveled. Up in Minnesota we would have cleaned up this mess in half an hour and eliminated the sign.

Motivational specialist Paul Meyer terms bitterness, resentment and regret the most useless time thief of all. "What if you could go back into the past and change the unpleasant memories? Do you really want to negate all of the valuable lessons you learned?" Meyer also challenged us that, if someone else is promoted and we are not, we ought to take the time to analyze what the other individual is doing right. If Cain and Esau had followed this challenge, the course of history would have drastically changed.

The most fearful thing about a root of bitterness is that it retards spiritual growth, choking out repentance, stultifying spiritual maturity. If we exercise productive godly sorrow, we would feel a motivation to solve our problems, turning our misguided lives around in true repentance, changing our lives for the better and preparing us for productive members of the God family.