

Norman C. Schwab  
Yacolt EV Free  
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### **Battling Bitterness** **Proverbs 14:10-13**

In the early years of the Promise Keepers organization, it exploded to a tremendous size. The demands of the ministry put a tremendous strain on the marriage of founder, Bill McCartney and his wife Lyndi. They are doing well now, but it wasn't always that way. In her book *From Ashes to Glory*, Lyndi writes candidly about her struggle with bitterness and what terrible destruction it brought into her life.

She writes, "I never enjoyed sharing my husband. I always felt cheated. Many times Christians would send me cards or flowers, writing lovely letters how much they appreciated me sharing my husband with them. But sometimes by unchristian spirit would take over and I'd want to tell them to quit borrowing my husband. I hated it, I resented it that people were always poking into our lives and stealing Bill's time. And I was angry at him because he let them do it...I spent a year in isolation. The kids were out on their own, just the two of us at home. I didn't answer the telephone. I shut the door to all outsiders. I even shut out the friends who loved me. I thought I just needed time to myself. Then I finally realized I needed to confront my own bitterness. I felt hopelessly caught deep in pain and blind to all the good. I was a wounded, ugly woman. I had made my husband my god and my Savior my sidekick. My life was bleeding profusely. I lost 70 pounds, 30 in January alone. It was a very scary time...totally hopeless and completely withdrawn.

Bitterness and isolation can be physically damaging and spiritually deadly. Have you ever felt the talons of bitterness creep up behind you and slowly slide into your shoulders? The isolation may initially feel like a massage of escape, Protection and security...but slowly, ever so slowly the talons of bitterness begin to work their pain deep into your life making it difficult to shake free. Have you ever felt the deep hurt of bitterness? My guess is some are there right now. Roots of bitterness can wind their way into your soul by way of anger, resentment, unforgiveness, maybe a desire for revenge. Maybe a root of bitterness has

taken hold of a fear or a sense of helplessness. Maybe you feel bitter from being excluded, left out. Maybe you are bitter because all your life people have convinced you that you are loser. And you are bitter. Bitterness has many roots doesn't it. Maybe you feel bitter over loss. Loss of control, loss of influence. Maybe a loss of something you once had and enjoyed. Maybe it's a loss of relationship, of intimacy, closeness.

Several months ago we studied the book of Ruth. Naomi had endured great loss of her husband and two sons in the middle of a famine in a land far from home. She told people to stop calling her **Naomi**, which means pleasant instead to call her Marah, which is the Hebrew word for bitter. She had lost much of what she had once enjoyed and was bitter unable to see the good. In I Samuel 30 **David's** soldiers at Ziklag were extremely bitter against David, wanting to kill him because David had made an unwise tactical military decision and the enemy had burned all their homes and taken away all wives and kids. They were bitter at the loss. In I Samuel 1 a woman named **Hannah** is bitter in her soul, weeping to the Lord because she was unable to have children. She was bitter, longing to have what others complained about. In the old testament **Job** has lost all his wealth, all his children, his health is gone, his wife and friends tell him to curse God and die. Job weeps bitterly "I loathe my life and speak out of the bitterness of my soul."

Whether a Bible character or a person living in the 21st century, none of us are exempt from the talons of bitterness that seek to work their way in. I know some people who seem to get more of difficult circumstances than others...but are still able to fend off the talons of bitterness. How do they do it? Some appear to have a relatively easy life yet...their life seems wracked with bitterness. Why is that? *How can we battle the bitterness that threatens to destroy and damage?* This morning we are going to look at some of the problems of bitterness. Some of the benefits of getting rid of bitterness. And finally some prescriptions for how to keep bitterness from taking roots in our lives.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Proverbs chapter 14. Proverbs is a book close to the center of your Bible, just to the right of Psalms. If you find Psalms just flip to the right and you have got it. Proverbs written to tell us how to live wisely and live life the way the creator of life intended. Look at Proverbs 14:10. "The heart knows its own bitterness, and a

stranger does not share its joy." I first read that verse and thought it was speaking about some kind of joy to be found in bitterness. But as I continued to study, I realized it was speaking about relationship, closeness. A stranger is not close enough to really share in a joy, so also a stranger isn't going to be their and understand the depth of bitterness and loss, maybe a loss of something that once brought joy. "The heart knows its own bitterness." There is a loneliness about that statement that speaks of isolation.

Bitterness tend to do that, close us up and shut us off. That's the first problem of bitterness. It closes us up and shuts us off. And just like Lyndi McCartney described, we close ourselves off and shut others out. In our bitterness, everyone, even friends start to feel like strangers and no can understand the depth of our pain. Bitterness causes us to withdraw. We don't want to hear from our friends, we don't go out much. We don't want to come to church. We don't want to have to answer the difficult questions. It's easy to reject those who come along and say "I know what your going through, I can sympathize with you. Because under our breath we think, you have no idea what I'm struggling with. You have no idea how I'm been hurt. So we withdraw, close up and shut others out. I won't let you get close enough to my heart, to let you hurt me so I will just withdraw and protect and hide as I devour my own heart.

And that is the problem with bitterness. It's not only self-centered, its self-destructive. Bitterness is the poison we ourselves drink in order to try and get back at someone else. In bitterness we lick our wounds and smack our lips over grievances long past. savor the prospect of a bitter confrontation still yet to come, a cold stare, a snub enjoying each last toothsome morsel both in the pain given and the pain you are giving back. What a feast is bitterness. The only problem is what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton of the feast is you, closed up and shut off, stiff arming anyone that might help you out of the pit.

Some may try to hide it all behind laughter. Proverbs 14:13 "Even in laughter the heart may be in pain." Some of us give the impression that they are really enjoying life, but underneath is a boiling seething of bitterness. You have learned to put the mask on a the appropriate times, to laugh and smile and joke to hide the bitterness and pain you are

nursing underneath. All the class clowns I got to know well came from a difficult situation, terrible circumstance. Everyone knew them, but few knew them well. They had learned to deflect and hide their pain and even shut others out by humor and laughter that told the whole world I'm OK don't get too close, don't go too deep because you won't like what you find and I won't let you in.

The problem of Bitterness is that it will close you up and shut you off from other people as you continue to devour yourself. Bitterness will also close us off from God. James 3:14 says "If you have bitter jealousy an selfish ambition in your heart, do not lie against the truth. v.15 This wisdom is not that which come down from above, but is earthly natural demonic. Bitterness is not from God, it is from the Evil One. Guess who it is that wants you to continue to feed your bitterness? It is the destroyer. He wants you to miss out and disrupt your relationship with others and with God. Bitterness will do just that, strangle our relationship with God. There are believers right here who are praising God with one breath and this afternoon will curse some person who have been made in God's image. James 3:11 says, "Does a fountain send out both fresh and bitter water? From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing? My brothers, these things ought not to be this way. With our tongue we bless our Lord and Father and with is we curse men." Wow. What destruction our bitterness can wreck on our relationship with God.

Folks, bitterness is not from God. Don't lie to yourself. It is not pious or righteous. Nothing good will come from it. The Bible calls it for what it is. Earthly, demonic. Now some may say. Well, God is the one I'm bitter toward. He is God and He allowed this terrible thing to happen in my life, He is the one I don't trust because of all the pain I've had. It's God's fault. Others may want to hold God hostage thinking they can force Him to do what they want, what they think is best for their life. God if you do this for me then all do this. If God doesn't come through the way they planned then they seek to punish God by holding Him at arms length.

Little Leroy came into the kitchen where his mother was making dinner. Christmas was coming up and he thought this would be a good time to tell his mother what he wanted. "Mom, I want a bike for

Christmas" Now little Leroy was a bit of a troublemaker. He had gotten into trouble at school and at home. Leroy's mother asked him if he thought he deserved to get a bike for Christmas. Little Leroy of course thought he did. Leroy's mother, being a Christian woman, wanted Leroy to reflect on his behavior over the last year. "Go to your room Leroy and think about how you have behaved this year. Then write a letter to God and tell him why you deserve a bike for Christmas. Leroy stomped up the steps to his room and sat down to write God a letter. Letter one. Dear God, I have been a good boy this year and I would like a bike for Christmas. I want a red one, your friend Leroy. Well, Leroy knew this wasn't true. He had not been a very good boy this year so he tore up the letter and started over. Letter 2, Dear God, This is your friend Leroy. I have been an OK boy this year and I would like a red bike for Christmas. Thank you. Your friend Leroy. Well Leroy knew even this wasn't true either so he tore up the letter and started again. Letter 3. God, I know I haven't been a good boy this year. I am very sorry. I will be a good boy if you just send me a bike for Christmas. Thank you, Leroy. Now Leroy knew that even if it was true, this letter wasn't going to get him that bike. So very upset, Leroy went downstairs and told his mom he wanted to go to church. Leroy's mom thought her plan had worked as the boy looked so very sad. Leroy walked down the street to the church on the corner. He went into the church and walked up to the altar, looking around to see if anyone was there. Leroy bent down and picked up a statue of the Virgin Mary. He slipped it under his shirt and ran out of the church, down the street, into his house and up the stairs, shutting the door to his room. Leroy then sat down with a piece of paper, pen and began to write his letter to God. God, I've got your mama. If you want to see her again. Send the bike. Signed, you know who.

Some people are bitter toward God because they feel He failed them in some way, let them down. They are disappointed with God and bitter because He didn't come through the way they had planned on. Maybe you tried to make a deal with God, to coerce Him into acting on your behalf. Maybe they tried to hold him hostage and when He didn't play your little game, you have tried to punish him by holding God at arms length ever since. People, I know there are many here who have experienced great disappointment with God and God's people. I don't

have all the answers to questions. But God is God and we are not. He is not up in heaven scratching his head in wonder even though we may be. God's trustworthiness is never in question. In question is our ability to trust. And bitterness will severely break our ability to trust in God as well as other people.

Hebrews 12:15 "See to it that no one misses the grace of God, and no bitter root grows up to cause trouble." Don't let your bitterness cause you to miss out on the wonderful grace of God. Grace that far exceed our guilt and our shame and our pain and hurt. Those bitter roots can cause us to miss out on the greatest gift from God, the grace of God made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. Freely offered, freely given to all who would receive and believe. If you haven't done that yet, today would be a great day to accept the gift of salvation, the gift of grace. Don't let bitterness cause you to miss out on experiencing God's grace and forgiveness. For beyond salvation there are great benefits to getting rid of bitterness in your life.

In fact the Bible tells us that getting rid of the bitterness in our life is actually a beauty aid. Do you want to look more attractive this holiday season? Then getting rid of the bitterness is an excellent alternative to that plastic surgery you were considering. Look with me at Proverbs 15:13 "A joyful heart makes a cheerful face, but when the heart is sad, when the inside is bitter, when the spirit is broken...only ugliness." Faces reveal feelings. Watch a person's expression, not what words they are saying, but what their face, their eyes are saying. This verse says the same or inner joy is reflected in the outer countenance, it shows on the person's face. What's going on inside reflect on the face outside. It's pretty tough to hide, especially to those who know you well. Recently I talked with a young woman who in the past had been quite shy, reserved. She would almost hide if you spoke to her. But I noticed as I spoke with her, the radiance, the brightness of eyes, the engaging in conversation...her whole countenance glowed. Why? Well it turns out there is a young man deeply in love with her. Her heart was filled with the delight of being loved and it couldn't help but squirt out all over her face. The outside will reveal what's happening deep inside.

So too with bitterness. I have known some very bitter people and the lines of bitterness are etched deeply into the lines on their faces. Not

the cheery crinkle lines but the haggard scowl lines. Bitterness undealt with becomes more and more pronounced the older one gets and the caldron of bitterness moves closer and closer to the surface until it's obvious to all the bitterness you hide deep in your heart, you wear right out on your face for all to see. If you want to be beautiful looking now and especially when you get older. Deal with your bitterness. Get rid of it and enjoy a beautiful makeover, for whatever is on the inside will eventually come on the outside.

Not only is getting rid of bitterness a beauty aid, it is also a health aid. Look with me at Proverbs 17:22 "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones." A bitter, sad, broken spirit leaves you feeling bone tired, but a joyful heart, a heart free of bitterness is actually a health aid, its good medicine. That Hebrew word for medicine is the only place here used in the Bible, but it means to be freed, set free of pain, cured. Medical experts are just recently catching on to what the Bible, God's word knew for a long time. There is a direct connection between spiritual health and physical health. A cheerful heart promotes good health. Look at Proverbs 18:14 "The spirit of a man can endure his sickness, but a broken spirit who can bear?" Bitter people don't heal up very well. In the inner strength is gone, if there is little will to live, even medicine can't cure him. "A crushed spirit...who can bear?" The doctors realize the importance of visiting friends, flowers, a card, a kind word. Those it itself help lift the spirits and promote health. Getting rid of the bitterness held down inside you will be a great medicine, health to your bones as well as beauty to your face.

So we've looked at the problems of bitterness, how it closes us off from God and other people. Proverbs has shown us some of the benefits of getting rid of the bitterness in our lives, promoting both beauty and health. So the question is. How can we do it? How can we get rid of that which has such a grip on us? How can I keep bitterness from taking root in my life. I certainly don't want to miss out on the grace of God? How can I get it out and keep it out? First, we need to recognize it as bitterness and call it for what it is. For some strange reason, bitterness is alot harder for me to see in myself then it is for others to see it in me. Probably because bitterness shows. I can hide it from me, but not from others, it is written all over our face and we rarely stop to look in the

mirror. We tend to be blind to our own bitterness. We may say, "I have forgiven that person, I'm not bitter, I just don't talk to them any more. Excuse me? Have we missed the grace of God somewhere here? Maybe you have said the words of forgiveness, but if you continue to keep them at arms length, if you continue the silent treatment, the cold stares and off-hand comments. You have not forgiven. You are allowing a talon of bitterness to wedge its way in. You may say I'm not bitter, I've given up trying to get revenge on that person who hurt me so bad. You probably wouldn't try to enact direct harm on them yourself, But then why are we so pleased when we hear that something difficult has happened to them. Why do we think, "serves them right...I hope God gets them good." Excuse me, have we missed out on the grace of God? I think we may need to look again in the mirror and see if a root of bitterness has threatened to sneak in.

If you fail to understand the grace of God that He has extended to you, if you miss the point of God's grace, you will be unable to extend that same grace and forgiveness to others. Unable to receive God's grace, forgive yourself or other people. Ephesians 4:31-32 says "Let all bitterness and anger be put away from you, and be kind to one another tenderhearted forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." This is the second step toward getting rid of bitterness. We have to obey God's command and weed it out. Throw it away. I have to act in grace and forgiveness to that other person, even as God acted toward me in forgiveness through Christ. I have to agree with God that bitterness is bad for me and that He knows what is better for me is to get rid of it. For Ephesian 4 says very clearly, "Get rid of bitterness and forgive people, just as God in Christ did for us." Let me ask you a question. Did we deserve the grace and forgiveness God in Christ gave to us? No. Do those who have hurt us deserve our grace and forgiveness? Probably not. But that is not the point. Grace is extending kindness to those who do not deserve it. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted forgiving, even when they don't deserve it. That's it. That is the grace that we could possibly miss if we cling to our bitterness. Don't miss it.

Step one, recognize and admit your bitterness. Step two. Agree with God about your bitterness, understand the grace that has been extended to you so you are then able to extend that same grace to others,

don't miss the grace. i.e. confess your sin of bitterness to God as He commands us to get rid of it. Step three, Act on your decision, demonstrate your forgiveness. It's not enough just to say the words, you have to live them out. Determine by your will to forgive and look for a way to demonstrate you really mean it. For if we don't demonstrate forgiveness then we really didn't mean it, they were just words to satisfy our religious conscience. It is our actions and attitudes that prove our true forgiveness and keep a root of bitterness from thorning its way under our skin.

The Bible says for us to love our enemies. To do good to those who hurt us. That does not come naturally does it? If you love and do good to your friends the Bible reminds us that's not a real big deal, the pagans who hate god do that, so what? But doing nice things to your enemy, now that has to come from a spirit of God, because we must do exactly the opposite of what we feel. Some may say, but I will feel like such a hypocrite, it won't be done sincerely because I don't feel like it. Guess what. At this point the Bible isn't super concerned about your feelings have not caught up with your will. God is mostly concerned that you are doing the right things, the feelings will follow your will, they may tail way behind, but the feelings will always follow your will. So how will you demonstrate your forgiveness this week? Maybe a smile? a phone call? a offer to buy lunch? a card? a small gift? By actually talking to them? You will be amazed at how your bitterness fades when you couple kindness to your words of forgiveness. It would help immensely if you were able to memorize this verse Ephesians 4:31-32, everytime those bitter feelings threaten to rear their ugly head repeat it. Maybe you need to memorize Hebrews 12:15. We do not want to miss out on Gods best, we cannot afford to miss out on the grace of God. For as we receive God's grace we are able to extend grace to others. Just as we were forgiven we then can forgive others. We can love because He first loved us.