

4 Sure Ways to Spot a Bitter Root in Your Heart

By Erin Davis

Every good gardener knows that you can't chop weeds. Try to go after those buggers with a weed eater, and you'll get nowhere in a hurry.

You've got to rip weeds up by the roots. Otherwise, they will just keep

coming back, and when they do, they're bound to bring more and more of their weedy friends.

It's no accident that God uses the image of a weed to describe a particular sin that has a way of creeping into all of our hearts . . . bitterness.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled ([Heb. 12:15](#)).

We need to take bitterness seriously.

Bitterness isn't one of those big, flashy sins that you can see growing above the surface of our hearts. It may not show off like anger or produce big ol' hunks of rotten fruit like disobedience. Bitterness is a sleeper sin. It grows beneath the surface, down deep in the soil of our hearts.

But the author's warning in Hebrews is clear—that bitter root will one day sprout, and when it does, "many will become defiled." In other words, if that bitter root keeps growing, there will be a harvest of pain for you and the people in your world. And because bitterness is a weedy sin that burrows in our hearts first, we can't just cut off the behaviors that bitterness causes. (We will get to those in a minute.) We need the Lord's help to yank that baby up by the root.

The pack that bitterness travels in:

[Ephesians 4:31](#) says, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice."

Paul is describing a cluster of emotions here that come along with bitterness. I know from experience that bitterness almost always travels in a nasty pack. When bitterness is taking root in my heart, usually wrath is, too. The same goes for anger, slander, and malice.

Our pastor directed my husband and me to this passage as part of our premarital counseling. He described these emotions as a progression.

- If we don't deal with bitterness, that bitterness will progress toward extreme anger (that's wrath).
- If we don't deal with the anger, we will start to clamor or demand what we want.
- If that doesn't work, we will start to talk bad about the object of our bitterness in the hopes of recruiting others to agree with and justify our feelings (that's slander).
- If that goes unchecked, we will eventually have a desire to cause harm to the person we are bitter toward.

Port Community Church

If you are dealing with bitterness and hurt in your life, we are here to walk with you without judgment. Let's get to the root of it today— It's time to be free.

All along the way, people are hurt, relationships are derailed, joy is stolen, and growth of the [fruit of the Spirit](#) is stunted.

Four Ways to Spot a Bitter Root:

With so much on the line, it is wise to ask ourselves often, "Am I bitter?" Since bitterness is a sleeper sin, the answer isn't always obvious. Here are four questions to help you spot a bitter root.

1. Am I replaying the tapes?

Do you find yourself constantly replaying the tapes of a conversation with someone? When you interact with her, do you spend days rehashing every word or body language cue?

Bitterness flourishes in the soil of justification. I've found that when I fixate on my interactions with a specific individual, I'm looking for justification for the anger or frustration I'm feeling in a relationship. I've learned that if I find myself replaying the tapes often, I should see it as a red flag that something is off in my own heart.

2. Is my mouth out of control?

[Romans 3:14](#) says, "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

There's a connection between the junk that comes out of our mouths and the bitterness that tends to take root in our hearts. Do you find yourself losing your cool often? Are you critical, snappy, rude? Do you find you cuss more easily following your interactions with someone who has hurt you? Maybe the sins you're committing with your mouth are simply an extension of the bitterness that you've allowed to grow in your heart. If you're trying to deal with the way you speak and gaining no ground, it's possible that you need to dig deeper and yank out the root of the problem.

3. Am I sick?

Psychologist Dr. Carsten Wrosch has studied bitterness for fifteen years. He says:

When harbored for a long time, bitterness may forecast patterns of biological dysregulation (a physiological impairment that can affect metabolism, immune response or organ function) and physical disease.

Scientists have concluded that bitterness, if left unchecked, interferes with the body's hormonal and immune systems. Bitter people tend to have higher blood pressure and heart rate and are much more likely to die of heart disease and other illnesses.

Of course, the apostle Paul didn't have access to this scientific data when he wrote much of the New Testament, but that didn't keep him from connecting the dots between bitterness and our bodies. In [Acts 8:23](#), Paul describes the "[gall](#)" of bitterness." It's a bile, a bitter substance that can literally make us sick.

I have a friend who regularly visits nursing homes to serve [communion](#) to the infirm. She has told me on multiple occasions that she can walk into such settings and identify bitter women simply by looking at them. Their postures and expressions can't help but betray the bitterness that has

burrowed deep into their hearts. Certainly, not all physical ailments are the fruit of a bitter root, but some are. Is it possible that the cells of your body are wilting under the weight of unchecked bitterness?

4. Is my clan bitter?

The “bitter root” in [Hebrews 12:15](#) is first described in [Deuteronomy 29:18](#):

Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.

Like all weeds, bitterness has a way of spreading. This passage describes one possible progression. A man infects his wife. She infects her children. The bitterness spreads, and soon the whole tribe is infected.

- Is your [marriage](#) marked by bitterness?
- Are your children bitter?
- Does your group of friends tend to sit around and gripe?
- Is your church filled with harsh and angry people?
- Is your community prone to placing blame?

Is it possible that your own bitterness has had a ripple effect and that the poisonous root has burrowed past your own heart and into the hearts of the people you love?

Let's Start Digging

Perhaps God has used this post to expose a [root of bitterness](#) you didn't know was there or maybe even one you did.

15 Ways to Kill Bitterness

By Paul Tautges

According to Hebrews 12:15, bitterness is a “root attitude” of the heart that grows where there is a shortage of grace. Roots grow downward, going deeper and getting more deeply embedded. The root of bitterness also causes other sins to grow upward and outward, “causing trouble” and “defiling many” other people. But how do we kill this root?

One of my favorite yard “tools” is Roundup, the liquid weed and grass killer that gets into the plant's internal “circulatory system,” going deep down to kill the very root—for good. Consider the following list as *Biblical Roundup for the Bitter Soul*.

1. Daily remind yourself that your sin against God, which has already been forgiven in Christ, is greater than anyone else's sin against you and that your new standard for forgiving others is how much God has forgiven you (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13).
2. Consciously put away every form of bitterness and refuse to take up offenses for the hurts of others (Eph 4:31).

3. Confess to God that your bitterness has surrendered ground to Satan, giving him a place in your life (Eph 4:26-27).
4. Remember that no injury you have experienced, or ever will experience, can compare to the injury received by Christ who prayed, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).
5. Forgive from your heart those who have hurt you, real or imagined, intentional or unintentional (Matt 18:35).
6. Consciously remember Joseph (Gen 50:20). Remind yourself of the truth that if you are a believer then God is always working behind the scenes for your good to conform you to the image of Christ (Rom 8:28-29).
7. Never seek revenge or make people pay for their sin (Rom. 12:19). Jesus already paid for it completely (1 Pet 3:18).
8. Remember that God's anger against you, and your sin, has been propitiated by Christ (Rom 3:25; 1 Jn 2:1-2). Therefore, you have no biblical right to harbor anger toward another.
9. Humble yourself and ask forgiveness from those against whom you've been bitter (Matt 5:23-24).
10. Bless those who hurt you; overcome evil with good (Rom 12:19-21).
11. Pursue love for one another, which covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet 4:8).
12. Actively choose not to remember the wrongs that others have committed against you. Actively choosing not to remember is different than forgetting. In Jeremiah 31:34, God says he will "remember no more" the sins of his people. This is not memory failure or forgetfulness. This is God's conscious choice to no longer hold our sins against us. We must do the same with the sins of others.
13. Destroy "lists of sins" committed against you, mental lists or actual, written lists (1 Cor 13:5).
14. Make peace with others, as much as is in your power (Rom 12:18). If a person from whom you've asked for forgiveness refuses to do so, but chooses instead to remain your enemy, then love them and pray for them while you continue to obey God and guard your own heart from bitterness (Matt 5:44).
15. Trust God to judge righteously (1 Pet 2:23).