

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! In this edition I'll be discussing what the scriptures say about bitterness.

I would encourage you to go to <https://thechurchofjesuschrist.info> as I continue to update the site. I have links to several specific features below. Let me know what you think, whether you have any suggestions, or any requests.

As always, I'm extending an invitation for submissions to be published in The Gospel Notes Newsletter (TGNN). Additionally, if you have a subject or a question that you would like to have covered in a future edition of TGNN, feel free to send me a note and I'll do my best to address it.

The primary criteria for inclusion of articles are these:

1. It should be oriented towards the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. It should use the scriptures as a source of information.
3. It should include references for any quoted 3rd party sources.
4. It should not be political.

If you have a testimony to share, please send that to me and let me know if you would like it to be included in a future edition of the newsletter. Please keep in mind the four criteria listed above where applicable.

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The Gall of Bitterness

By Jared D. Edson

Acts 8:18-24

18 And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money,

19 Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.

20 But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.

21 Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter; for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.

22 Repent, therefore, of this thy wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.

23 For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.

24 Then answered Simon and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.

Alma 17:16 Now as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart, O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

Alma 19:75 And now, my son, all men that are in a state of nature or, I would say, in a carnal state, are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity; they are without God in the world, and they have gone contrary to the nature of God; therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness.

Mormon 4:39-40

39 There shall be murders and robbing, and lying, and deceivings, and whoredoms, and all manner of abominations--when there shall be many who will say, Do this or do that, and it mattereth not, for the Lord will uphold such at the last day.

40 But wo unto such, for they are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity.

The phrase “gall of bitterness” has always in my mind been a curious thing. Upon further examination we find that the term gall has an interesting definition. The Hebrew meaning of the term refers to “bile” – which is the unpleasant substance produced by your liver and temporarily stored in – you guessed it – your gall bladder. It is used in the process of digestion, but anyone that has experienced that involuntary expulsion of contents of the stomach will understand that this is especially nasty.

If we then change to the modern term, “gall of bitterness” it would become “bile of bitterness,” but in fairness to the Hebrew language it can refer to any bitter or poisonous substance. Another definition of gall refers to it as the venom of snakes. (see <https://www.kingjamesbibledictionary.com/Dictionary/gall#:~:text=Easton's%20Bible%20Dictionary-,Gall,%2C%22%20%22bitter%20water.%22>)

As applied to the scriptures, “gall of bitterness” then becomes more meaningful as someone who is living in poison that is vile to the taste. That does not mean “sour” as some might think, but legitimately undesirable in every respect, possibly even deadly.

To add insult to injury, Jesus was given vinegar mingled with gall while he was on the cross, in fulfillment of the prophecy through David:

Psalms 69:21 They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

Matthew 27:36 They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall; and when he had tasted the vinegar, he would not drink.

If we return to the main subject though, those who are in the “gall of bitterness” are said by Alma in Alma 19:75 to be “in a state contrary to the nature of happiness.” That tells us something very important: bitterness is in opposition to happiness.

But what is bitterness if it is not happiness? One might think sadness is the opposite of happiness, and that may partly be true, but there is a difference between being sad and being bitter: one is passive while the other is active.

Think about it for a minute – if you are bitter about something, you have:

1. Regrets
2. Disenfranchisement
3. A grudge
4. Anger

You are bitter if you possess any of these:

1. Wishing one thing could have been, but something else happened – that would be a regret.
2. Upset at former treatment or lack of respect, that would be disenfranchisement.
3. A continual or persistent desire for bad things to happen to someone because of who they are, what they have done to others, or what they have done to you, which would be a grudge.
4. A caustic bad attitude towards someone because they have not met your standard of decency, or because they have said or done something you believe was intentional against you or others, which would be anger.

Bitterness towards anyone is a condition that makes you “not happy,” and it can encroach upon your life in spiritual, physical, or mental ways. There is a cure for it, but for some the price of the cure is something they are unwilling to pay. The cure for bitterness is forgiveness.

We often think of forgiveness as something we only need to get from God, but that is not true. Let us remember the great example prayer that Jesus gave for us:

Matthew 6 (Inspired Version)

9 Therefore, after this manner shall ye pray, saying,

10 Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

11 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven.

12 Give us this day our daily bread.

13 **And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

14 And suffer us not to be led into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

15 For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.

16 **For if ye forgive men their trespasses, who trespass against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses.**

Note the additional instruction Jesus gave in verse 16. **This is very important.** Not only do we need to ask forgiveness from God, we need to forgive others or we cannot ourselves be forgiven. Bitterness is a blockage against our own forgiveness – it stands as a guardian against our own happiness.

The problem many of us face is that we don't even recognize it in our own lives. Sure, we may couch it up in terminology like, "it wouldn't be wisdom for me to have any more dealings with that person, because they did me wrong," and thus we can justify hard feelings we may retain against them. If it truly is wisdom to not have dealings with some person, then we need to make sure we aren't doing so because of any hard feelings we have held against them.

The word "reconciliation" is something to add to our dictionary of things that we do daily. Reconciliation is not a word that means we give up something just for the sake of doing so, but because we truly want some improvement to take place in the relationship between ourselves and the other person. Do you have enough love in your heart to want improvement to take place?

The hardest part of reconciliation is the humility and willingness to do it. It can take courage despite your strongest feelings against it because you might fear either success or failure, or even both.

What is reconciliation? We often call it "extending an olive branch" to someone because it means we put forth something to the one we are at odds with to entice them to do likewise – something that is on their terms. The "olive branch" brought back to Noah by the dove was God's way of saying, "the earth is cleansed and it is awaiting your habitation." We do the same by giving the other person the opportunity to be renewed in a cleansed relationship with us, starting from scratch as it were.

How this is done depends on the nature of the difference that exists between the two people, and true reconciliation may not be possible if the other person does not accept it, but once you have extended your invitation the choice is theirs.

Proverbs 25:21-22

21 If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink;

22 For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee.

Romans 12:17-21

17 Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.

18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

20 Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing, thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

These are not spiteful acts, but acts of true love, sincerity, and concern.

Human nature is sometimes such that we may offer that “olive branch” out of a sense of duty instead of a desire for real change, so that any lack of acceptance is then “justifiable.” The “olive branch” however cannot be one of counting points on our ledger or theirs, rather, it must be extended with forgiveness already granted regardless of the response.

One problem we face as Christians is not our understanding of forgiveness, but our lack of participation in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Remember what Jesus taught:

Luke 9:23-24

23 And he said unto them all, If any man will come after me, **let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.**

24 For whosoever will save his life must be willing to lose it for my sake; and whosoever will be willing to lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.

What do we deny ourselves? We deny ourselves the sense of self-justification. We deny ourselves the need for retribution. We deny ourselves the need to be superior to others. We deny ourselves the need to be proven right in the eyes of others. We deny the adversary from taking up bitter residence in our souls.

Let us remember how Paul advised us to deal with bitterness:

Phillipians 4:6-9

6 Be afflicted for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.

7 And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report--if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

9 Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do; and the God of peace shall be with you.

You cannot have peace and bitterness co-resident within you, because one will seek to be the master over the other. The “pure in heart” must be pure indeed because it has no room for impurities to stain the salvation that is offered to us.

James 3:10-18

10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not and lie not against the truth.

15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

Holding onto bitterness can be the same thing a drug addict feels when they have been away from their drug just long enough to feel the pangs of withdrawal. While they know it is bad for them, they have great difficulty resisting the urge to take it again, even when they know it might kill them. Bitterness is the same for us – we often hold onto it as a drug to satiate our personal feelings of superiority or justification, and it is just as deadly as any drug or poison.

Proverbs 6:16-19

16 These six things doth the Lord hate; yea, seven are an abomination unto him:

17 **A proud look**, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

18 **A heart that deviseth wicked imaginations**, feet that be swift in running to mischief,

19 A false witness that speaketh lies, and **he that soweth discord among brethren**.

As with any addictive drug, even bitterness can become comforting to the person who feels the world has done him an injustice, but that does not keep the effects of it from being just as destructive.

2 Peter 2:22 But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb: The dog is turned to his own vomit again, and, The sow that was washed, to her wallowing in the mire.

We need to remember the Lord Jesus Christ, his sufferings, and his doctrine which he sent forth with the disciples:

3 Nephi 5

29 And there shall be no disputations among you as there hath hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine as there hath hitherto been;

30 For verily, verily, I say unto you, He that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention; and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger one with another;

31 Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.

32 Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, I will declare unto you my doctrine. And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me;

Here is what we do know: bitterness is in opposition to happiness, and it is also in opposition to the doctrine of Christ. Jesus does not want us to harbor ill feelings towards one another, nor does he ask us to think or speak evil of anyone, but commands us that these things should be done away. Bitterness is as much a poison to our spirit as any poison can be to our bodies. Like any false doctrine, bitterness will lead to the same outcome as anger and hatred: sorrow, pain, and ultimately death.

We cannot control how others might receive our efforts to be reconciled to one another, but we can put forth our best efforts. In the day of judgment it is not whether we succeeded in being reconciled, but in how sincere we were in doing so. Sincerity and haughtiness are on opposite ends of the scale. If we have done our part, we have no reason to feel guilt later.

Nephi, the son of Lehi, and brother to Laman, Lemuel, Sam, Jacob and Joseph, was a man for whom it would be perfectly reasonable to hold onto bitterness against the efforts of his brothers Laman and Lemuel to destroy him and his family, but even this same Nephi found comfort in both forgiving and in forgiveness. He, like many a poet, had swings from happiness to sorrow, but unlike many poets, never bitterness.

2 Nephi 3:31-58

31 Nevertheless, the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth, O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh.

32 My soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

33 I am encompassed about because of the temptations and the sins which doth so easily beset me.

34 And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.

35 My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.
36 He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh.
37 He hath confounded mine enemies unto the causing of them to quake before me.
38 Behold, he hath heard my cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the nighttime.
39 And by day have I waxed bold in mighty prayer before him; yea, my voice have I sent up on high; and angels came down and ministered unto me.
40 And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceeding high mountains.
41 And mine eyes have beheld great things, yea, even too great for man; therefore, I was bidden that I should not write them.
42 Oh, then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited me in so much mercy, why should my heart weep, and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken because of mine afflictions?
43 And why should I yield to sin because of my flesh?
44 Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul?
45 Why am I angry because of mine enemy?
46 Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin!
47 Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul!
48 Do not anger again because of mine enemies.
49 Do not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions.
50 Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say, O Lord, I will praise thee forever! Yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation!
51 O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul?
52 Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies?
53 Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?
54 May the gates of hell be shut continually before me because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite?
55 O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road?
56 O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness?
57 O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies?
58 Wilt thou make my path straight before me?

His reliance upon the Lord to help him overcome the tragedies, the sorrows, and the circumstances of life are a textbook answer for us to strive towards so that we might become more Christ-like in our lives. His desire, like ours should be, is that we might find our path to the Lord without the encumbrances of sin to deter us on this journey towards eternal life.

Let us rejoice in the Lord forevermore, and be happy in the safety that His gospel provides us from the bitterness that seeks to destroy our peace.

Romans 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice.