

# The Root of Bitterness

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April 29, 2020

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Most of us have had an experience, invariably bad, with bitter people. Something has happened to them that they have continued to resent for years or decades, and they often take out their resentment on those who are closest to them. Frequently, we turn to Hebrews 12:15 for a Biblical condemnation of such behavior.

Because Hebrews 12:14 emphasizes the importance of pursuing peace with others, I think this is a correct reading of the text. It makes sense in context. However, the Hebrews writer is saying more here than we commonly credit.

The concept of a root of bitterness does not appear for the first time in Hebrews. Instead, the writer is paraphrasing Deuteronomy 29:18, which warns against those who are roots that bear poisonous and bitter fruit. However, in the context of Deuteronomy, such people aren't quarrelsome and resentful. Instead, they are idolaters. They cause widespread trouble because they lead others away into idolatry.

At first glance, it appears that the Hebrews writer has missed the point of the quotation from Deuteronomy 29. However, given the great skill with which the writer (to say nothing of the Holy Spirit!) uses the Old Testament through the rest of the book, this is extremely unlikely. Instead, he has left an additional lesson for those who are familiar with the Law of Moses too.

He wants us, in fact, to recognize that bitterness is a form of idolatry. After all, the New Testament frequently reminds us that idolatry does not necessarily involve worshiping a golden statue. In Colossians 3:3, Paul notes that greed is a form of idolatry. People who care about money and stuff more than anything else are bowing down to Mammon, whether they recognize it or not.

However, we can take the analysis one step further even than that. When we are greedy, it's not really the money and the stuff that we value. It's the way that they make us feel, and we prize that feeling so much that we are willing to abandon God and do evil in order to experience it. When it comes to covetousness, the idol we are worshiping is the self.



The same is true for bitterness. People who can't move past a wrong that they have suffered are resentful because it is a wrong that they have suffered. Somebody has hurt them, or hurt somebody close to them, and that's the unforgivable sin, because it is a wrong that has touched their precious, invaluable self. This is so great a violation of the way that they think things ought to be that they feel justified in mistreating the wrongdoer, or even in mistreating an innocent third party.

As a result, they repeatedly express the outrage they feel at their own injury by injuring others, often until the end of their lives. Even if people like this faithfully attend worship services, Jesus is not and cannot be the Lord of their hearts. He cannot be most important to them, because nothing is more important to them than they are.

They are their own miserable, spiteful idols.

When Jesus exhorts us to be merciful and forgiving, then, He does not merely do so because mercy and forgiveness are good. Instead, it is because being merciful and forgiving is a necessary part of subjecting ourselves to Him. When we place so much importance on ourselves that we refuse to forgive, we reveal that we have been defiled by the idol of selfishness in our hearts.