

“Life’s too Short to...Carry a Grudge”

Did you ever have to carry something really heavy a long ways? You know that there are two kinds of people in the world. There are people who travel light. They are called men. Then there’s the other kind of people, and in my family we have both kinds of people.

OK, I admit that I rarely travel light. My briefcase sometimes weighs a ton and when I pack a suitcase it’s almost always the biggest one and it’s always full.

But it’s bad enough to have to carry something that’s going to weigh your body down really bad, but who would ever sign up to carry something that’s going to crush your spirit, going to weigh down your soul, going to burden your heart? Who would do that?

Let me ask you this: If a grudge was something physical and tangible, what would it look like? What would it feel like? I don’t know exactly, but I’ve got this backpack filled with rocks that represent the grudges we can carry around. There’s different size grudges like this small rock. This is like a little junior varsity grudge. This is a grudgette.

And we have pretty interesting language about grudges. We talk about them the way that we talk about babies, because you can **hold** a grudge. You can **carry** a grudge. You can **put it on your shoulders** and **bear** a grudge. We even talk about how you can **nurse** a grudge.

When you nurse something, you feed it what will keep it alive; what will make it grow. You can do that with a grudge. You can feed it real hostile thoughts, feed it angry feelings, feed it distorted perceptions, feed it hostile intentions, until eventually, what was once a little junior varsity grudge becomes a full grown grudge. People will walk around and carry one of these for weeks or months or years.

Now, you’d think that nobody would ever volunteer to sign up for duty like that because these things are heavy. Nobody says to herself or himself, “Now, I can’t wait to get up this morning and pick up my grudge and carry it all through the day. This is going to be a tremendous day, me and my grudge.” Nobody says that, but people do it everyday.

The truth is, though, a grudge will never contribute to your authentic joy, and it will never make you a more loving person. In fact, it will lead you away from the life that you want to live. My hope and prayer is that today, today, you set down your grudges. Because life is too short to carry a grudge.

Let’s start with the facts. The fact is that every human being that walks the face of this earth has been hurt by other human beings, and we all carry some of these hurts around. Have any of you ever read “Ann Landers” and “Dear Abby”? Did you know that they were twin sisters who for many, many, many years wouldn’t speak to each other because of unresolved conflict? Ann Landers died in 2002, Dear Abby is 90 and has Alzheimer’s. I read that their daughters are also carrying on their mother’s feuds because grudges sometimes get passed down from one generation to another.

This is amazingly ironic to me. For decades and decades the two people in our country who got more letters asking for advice on how to fix relationships than anybody else, are family members who don’t speak to each other now for two generations!

Of course, broken relationships don’t just happen between family members. Sometimes there are people who work together, and they live in a state of suspicion, or jealousy, or animosity for months or years. Sometimes people who used to be friends get hurt, and they just drift apart. Sometimes people attend the same church and worship the same God. They go week after week, year after year, with judgment, and bitterness, and hostility in their heart. They sit together in the same room. They listen to the same messages from God’s Word, but they’re carrying a stone. But life is too short to live like that.

As we look deeper into this, I want to introduce you to a character in the Bible. He’s kind of an obscure character. You may never have heard of him, but I think he might be called the patron saint of the grudge. His name is Lamech. Lamech is mentioned in the fourth chapter of Genesis, the first book in the Bible. He was a descendent of Cain, and to get his story you need to understand one aspect of Cain’s story.

You see, Cain killed his brother Abel. The Bible says that Cain was afraid that somebody would try to take revenge on him. So God put a mark on Cain. It’s called the “mark of Cain.” God said that mark would be

a reminder that if anybody tried to take revenge on Cain, if anybody killed him, that person would be avenged seven times over. This mark of Cain is kind of a warning, because God realizes that once the human race gives in to the desire for revenge it will destroy itself. God says human beings are not to take vengeance into their own hands.

A couple generations later, Lamech is born as a descendent of Cain. We're told two things about him: one is that he was married to 2 women named Adah and Zillah. The other thing is that one day somebody hurt Lamech. We don't know any of the details. It might have been an accident, it might have been intentional, but it must have festered in him. So Lamech decided to get even, and one day he picked up a rock. He killed the guy who hurt him.

Afterwards, he bragged about it. In Hebrew, it was kind of a poem or song. Take a look at the words of Lamech. **"Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech will be avenged seventy-seven times" (Genesis 4:23-24).** In other words, "You thought it was bad to mess with Cain, that's nothing compared to messing with me."

You could call this the "Law of Lamech." "You hurt me, I'll hurt you back; I'll hurt you worse; I'll make you pay." Notice the math in his statement: seventy-seven times over. That's the way bitterness works. A bitter spirit is never satisfied. Lamech is the patron saint of the grudge.

Jesus came along and said that there are a lot of ways to kill somebody. He said you can do it with harsh words. You can do it with gossip. You can just withdraw. We do this a lot to our spouses. We're tired and cranky, they're tired and cranky. We say things out of that crankiness. We start to harbor resentment toward each other, that builds, but because we're generally nice people, we don't out and out say mean things or do mean things. Generally we just start to withdraw. We freeze our spouses out because of resentment. It starts out as a grudgette, then it becomes one of these...or two or three of them.

You keep doing that day after day, week after week. Over time you find that where once you had a heart of love towards a husband or wife, towards a mom or a dad, towards a brother or a sister, towards a friend or a business partner, one day you find you're a stone carrier. All the joy, the goodness is getting choked out of you.

You say to yourself, "I'm no Lamech. I haven't murdered anybody." That's true. But, all the forces that work together to crush love out of a human heart, all the forces of judgmentalism, and coldness, and icy anger, and frozenness, and bitterness, and meanness of spirit, all of that stuff is working inside of you. It's just a matter of time until it takes over your whole personality.

But, there is another way. Jesus Christ was sent by God to this earth. I don't know what you think about Jesus. That's up to you. But Jesus came, among other things, to say, "Because of God's love, there's an alternative. There's another way that you can respond to the hurts of life. You can forgive."

Peter, one of the disciples, came up to Jesus one day. And just like Lamech, Peter's been hurt by somebody. We don't know any of the details, but it happened several times. Peter says to Jesus, **"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21, NIV).**

Peter thinks he's being real generous with this. He expects that Jesus will say, "Wow, you're willing to forgive seven times? Good move, Peter. I'm really impressed." But Jesus doesn't say that. Look at Jesus' response. Jesus answered Peter, **"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22, NIV).**

Check this out! Where do you think Jesus got that number seventy-seven? Do you think he just pulled it out of thin air? Jesus knew the Old Testament backwards and forward. He chooses that number very deliberately. He is doing a beautiful thing. Jesus is now reversing the Law of Lamech.

He's saying, "Peter, if you want to, you can follow the Law of Lamech. You can pick up a stone and carry it around. You can harbor bitterness and resentment. You can carry a grudge the rest of your life. You can do that if you want to, **or** you can follow me. You can forgive from your heart. You can seek to be reconciled with another person. Peter, put down the stone. If you want to follow me, Peter, you have to put down the stone. You can carry a grudge or you can follow me. You cannot do both."

Jesus tells a story to drive home how serious he is. It was a story about what in our day would be called a real big corporation, and it undergoes a very intense audit. And that audit reveals some extremely irregular and highly unethical accounting practices. Of course, nothing like that would go on in our day! In Jesus' day, that kind of thing would happen occasionally. The owner of this corporation, the master in this story, finds out that an employee has embezzled a massive amount of money. This is the key to the story. It's literally more money than the people of Israel had to pay to Rome, as a national debt every year. It was such a large amount of money it's impossible for one person to think of ever paying it off.

When the owner finds out about this and he calls in this employee, the employee knows he's going to be sent to jail and falls down begging for mercy. The owner not only says, "All right, I won't have you sent to jail," he also says, "You don't have to pay the debt. I forgive the debt."

Let's think for a second here. In a situation like that, the debt doesn't just disappear. Somebody has to pay. So who's going to take the loss? Who's going to pay the debt? The owner, the master is. That's God.

It would be nice and easy if the story ended there. But it doesn't. Because the employee is forgiven this massive debt, but then immediately tracks down somebody who owes him money, but it's like pocket change. You'd think that after being forgiven a mountain of debt, he would be eager to forgive this little pebble of debt. That he would also show mercy, but he doesn't. He grabs the guy around the throat, starts to choke him, and has him thrown in jail. When the owner hears about this, when the master hears what happened, he calls the employee back in for a second round. But the second round goes a whole lot different than the first round.

The master says, "You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. I forgave a mountain of debt. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" These are the words of Jesus. "In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed."

Then there's this sentence. Jesus said, "**This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart**" (Matthew 18:35, NIV).

I just want to pause for a moment and leave those words up on that screen and let them sink in. These are some of the most sobering words in the Bible. There's a whole lot of people-- sometimes people in churches--who live as if Jesus didn't really say this, as if Jesus didn't really mean this. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive each other from your heart."

In case anybody's wondering whether Jesus could possibly be serious about this kind of thing, he says it a little different in another place in Matthew. Jesus says, "**If you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins**" (Matthew 6:14-15, TNIV).

I think those are some of the scariest words in the Bible. Jesus says that if we're walking around with unresolved bitterness and resentment, and we refuse to do the work of forgiveness, and to be reconciled with other people, we're at severe spiritual risk.

I think the only way that a human being can withhold forgiveness from somebody else, and walk around carrying a grudge, is when they forget, when they live in a kind of denial of the infinitely greater amount of forgiveness that they need from God.

My forgiveness came at the cost of the cross. It came at the price of the death of God's Son. That's how much it cost for my forgiveness. That's the price that God paid, that Jesus willing paid. Listen, I think the only way that I can harden my spirit up and choke somebody else, tell somebody else I'm not going to forgive them, is when I forget how deeply stained I am by sin--pride, self-centeredness, arrogance, cowardice, prejudice, deception, cruelty, apathy--that's the truth about me. The Bible says that's true for each one of us.

It cost Jesus his life to forgive me and to forgive you. That means there's only one safe place to put a grudge, and that place is at the foot of the cross. Because of the cross you don't have the right to carry a grudge.

I'm wondering today, whatever stone you're carrying around, would you be willing today to lay it at the foot of the cross? Whatever your hurt and your bitterness is, would you be willing to lay it at the foot of the cross and remember again the price that was paid for your forgiveness and for mine? I'm telling you, when people live at the foot of the cross, they don't carry stones because they remember. I really do believe that the only safe place to carry a grudge is to the foot of the cross.

Now, I know what a hard thing it can be to forgive. Some of you are thinking, "There's no way." There's somebody you've had financial dealings with--an employer, a client, a business partner, or a boss--and you trusted them and they used you. They used you for their gain. They didn't care a thing about your loss. They did it deliberately, and you just feel violated.

You have an ex-spouse that raked you over the coals. You have a family member who damaged your heart, who did mean, cold things to you. You have somebody that you thought was a friend, who said things to you, or said things about you to somebody else, that wounded you to the core. Inside you there's something that says, "There's no way. Let them out of that prison? Set that stone down? Give them a free pass? There's no way." On your own, no. But with God's help you can. Even if that person never changes, never apologizes, we forgive and let God handle the rest. Life is too short. Many of you have been carrying around that stone for a long time. Set it down.

A couple of years ago we had a guest speaker here at Saint Paul's named Cindi Broaddus. You may have heard about her story. She and a friend were driving to the airport one early morning in 2001 when someone deliberately dropped a gallon jug of sulfuric acid from an overpass on the interstate. It went through the windshield of the car and burned her over most of her body. She was given a 30% chance to survive. She underwent 15 surgeries and countless skin grafts and years of physical therapy and is truly a survivor. They never found the person who did it.

The day she spoke here I talked to her one on one and asked her a whole bunch of questions about forgiveness. I asked "What is forgiveness to you? What would you do if you met the person who did this? Does forgiveness mean forgetting?"

Listen, there is no miracle in the world like the miracle of forgiveness. You can, if you want to, live by the Law of Lamech. I'll bet if you want to, you can rationalize that your bitterness, that your anger, that your resentment that goes on day after day is fully justified because of what the other person did. You can do that to yourself if you want to. But I hope you don't because life is too short, and it will kill you.

I don't know how badly you've been hurt. I know some of you have been hurt real bad, in some cases over a long period of time. I hope you'll forgive. It may take a long time. If you need help get help. Read books. If you need to talk to a good Christian counselor, talk to a good Christian counselor. If you need to make a phone call, Jesus would say, make it right now. If you need to write a note, write it today.

Maybe you just need to go to a door that's been closed for a long time and knock on the door. Go there and knock. Do it today. Maybe it will take a lot of time and a lot of effort and a lot of persistence, a lot of wisdom, a lot of counsel, a ton of prayer. Because just to forgive someone can be quite a difficult thing. Maybe that person will respond, maybe not, but you do your part.

There is no miracle like the miracle of forgiveness. If you're a follower of Jesus, if you love God, you've been forgiven an infinite debt. You have been cleansed of the ultimate stain. What God has given you, you've got to give to the hurting, hurtful people around you. Please carry your stones to the cross. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. John Ortberg, teaching pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for his resources for this message series.